

A British Airways agent speaks with a baggage handler at Dulles International Airport Friday in Dulles, Virginia. British Airways flights to and from the Washington, DC, area airport have been plagued by cancellations and delays after one of the air carrier's Heathrow-to-Dulles flights was escorted to Dulles by US fighter planes on New Year's Eve.

PHOTO: AFP

Britain warns of more flight disruption

REUTERS, London

London said yesterday specific information led to the grounding of several British Airways flights in the past week and warned more cancellations might be needed to prevent another Sept. 11-style attack.

Transport Secretary Alistair Darling said British intelligence services had received information that supported that picked up by the United States.

"The threat that we now face is likely to endure for many years," he told BBC Radio. "We are dealing with a different order of magnitude of threat."

"There may occasionally, from time to time, be the need to ground a particular flight... but the vast majority of people will be able to fly in the normal way."

Intelligence information led

to the cancellation of BA's Flight 223 from London to Washington Friday for the second day in a row. The same flight was held outside Washington on Wednesday after fighter jets escorted it in.

Passengers were questioned, but no one was arrested.

A spokeswoman for BA said Saturday the airline planned to operate Flight 223 to Washington at 1505 GMT, but warned passengers to check times. "We are operating as normal, but that may change," she said.

Europe's biggest airline also scrapped Saturday's flight from London to Riyadh for security reasons, and its return on Sunday.

A decision was pending on Monday's flight.

Asked whether British authorities had information about specific threats, Darling said: "Yes we do. And the reason that different flights

are either grounded or there is increased security varies from time to time."

A British anti-terror police source told Reuters the British Airways security alerts were purely intelligence-based, and no arrests had been made or materials found.

The source added security at Heathrow, already at a high stage of alert, had not been stepped up further.

The BA groundings bring the number of cancellations of US-bound international flights to seven since Christmas Eve.

Three Air France Los Angeles-Paris flights were grounded on Dec. 24 and 25, and Air France's New York-Paris flight was diverted to New Zealand on New Year's Day.

Aeromexico Flight 490 from Mexico City to Los Angeles was grounded Wednesday and Thursday.

Worried about the possibility of another Sept. 11-style attack, Washington is sharing more intelligence with other nations, has asked foreign airlines to put armed marshals on some flights and send fighter jets to tail some incoming planes.

US officials have said they are uncertain whether they have yet succeeded in foiling a specific plot.

Security experts said governments saw acting on flimsy information as preferable to being blamed after an attack.

"I think you have to understand the position governments are in politically. If, God forbid, something terrible happens and then it emerges they had information of a risk but did not do anything, they would be totally exposed politically," said Kevin Rosser, terrorism analyst at London-based Control Risks Group.

Laden tapes are authentic: Germans

AFP, Munich

German police experts believe the various videos and tapes attributed to al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden since the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States are authentic, according to a report quoted by the weekly Focus which goes on sale Monday.

It said experts had ruled out the possibility that the tapes had been put together from archive material or otherwise manipulated.

According to Focus, the analyses established that Bin Laden uses modern recording equipment, including a computer. The experts also put forward the hypothesis that the terrorist network has its own recording studio in which it handles raw material.

The German specialists even analysed a bird-song that could be heard in the background on one of the tapes, and identified it as coming from a bird which only lived in certain regions.

Since September 11 2001 around 15 video and audio recordings have been attributed to Bin Laden by various media. The most recent was broadcast by the Dubai-based satellite news channel Al-Arabiya on December 20.

US boosts Musharraf watch after attacks

REUTERS, Washington

After two recent assassination attempts that bear the markings of al-Qaeda, the US government is stepping up efforts to protect Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf. The Washington Post reported yesterday.

Quoting unidentified US officials, the newspaper said Washington was also urging Musharraf to crack down further on Islamic groups accused of terrorism.

The United States had sent electronic jamming devices that helped foil the first attempt on Musharraf by interfering with the detonation of explosives, officials were quoted as saying. The bombings narrowly missed Musharraf but killed 15 people and wounded 45.

A second bomb on Dec. 14 exploded moments after his motorcade had passed.

Since the attacks, US officials have increased intelligence sharing and other efforts to help Musharraf's security forces, The Post said.

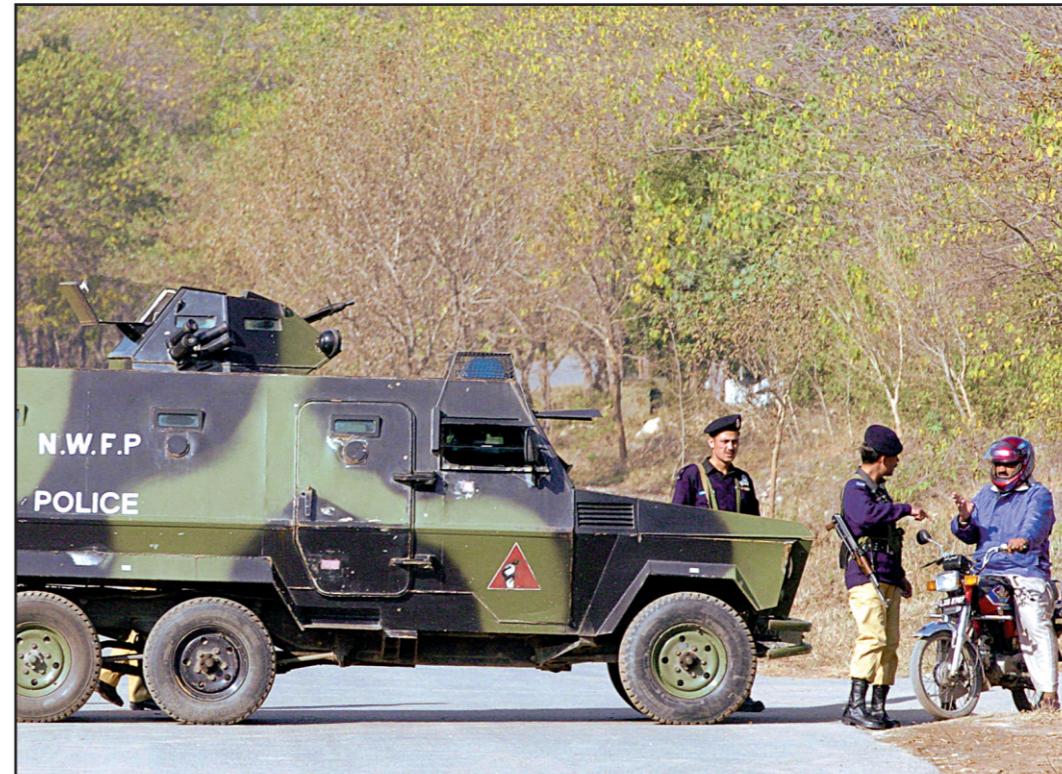


PHOTO: AFP

Armed Pakistani policemen stop a motorcycle next to an armoured vehicle, which is blocking a road leading to the venue of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Council of Ministers meeting in Islamabad yesterday. A massive security blanket has been thrown over the Pakistani capital, with police having set up special barricades at key intersections, around Saarc venues and hotels where delegations are staying.

S Asian leaders fly into huge security net

AFP, Islamabad

Public bonhomie, a bear hug, befitting smiles and Pakistani officials restrained on Kashmir -- this was the uncharacteristic mood that marked the normally short-fuse India-Pakistan official interactions ahead of the 12th regional South Asia summit starting today.

Though no formal dialogue is expected on the sidelines of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) summit, Islamabad is pressing for a bilateral meeting and to make the task easier for the Indians, the host nation seems to have set aside all its fire-power on Kashmir.

The 12th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) runs from today to Tuesday.

The airport was closed for two days to all commercial flights and the 13km road to the city was flanked by gun-toting troops, police commandos and plain-clothes officers.

The Prime Ministers of Bhutan and Nepal, Lyndon Jigme Yaeser Thinley and Surya Bahadur Thapa, landed just after 9:30 am (0130 GMT) to a brief ceremonial playing of their national anthems.

Vajpayee, making his first trip to Pakistan since 1999, will have his own 'Black Cat' commandos and travel in bulletproof cars specially airflown from India, officials in New Delhi said.

Vajpayee's February 1999 trip to the eastern city of Lahore to launch a cross-border bus service was marred by massive protests by Islamists.

copters flew overhead.

Armed soldiers holding sniffer dogs prowled through airport lounges as journalists were subjected to special checks by security officials who scanned their equipment with metal detectors.

Police have set up special barricades at key intersections and no one was allowed to stay on bridges along the road to Islamabad.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga are due later Saturday.

Vajpayee, making his first trip to Pakistan since 1999, will have his own 'Black Cat' commandos and travel in bulletproof cars specially airflown from India, officials in New Delhi said.

Around 10,000 police and paramilitary troops are manning security in the city dotted by dozens of check posts and troops are manning anti-aircraft guns in hills overlooking the city.

His national security adviser Brajesh Mishra flew into Islamabad on Friday, a day ahead of his scheduled arrival with Vajpayee.

Musharraf narrowly survived a suicide bomb attack on Christmas day in Rawalpindi neighbouring Islamabad when two attackers rammed explosives-laden vehicles into his convoy, killing 15 people and injuring 45 others.

The attack came just 11 days after he narrowly missed being killed in a bomb ambush as his convoy passed over a bridge.

Authorities have closed roads between the Convention Centre venue of the summit and two five star hotels where delegates are staying, banned protest rallies and closed the city's schools and colleges for the Sunday to Tuesday summit.

Around 10,000 police and paramilitary troops are manning security in the city dotted by dozens of check posts and troops are manning anti-aircraft guns in hills overlooking the city.

3 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire in Nablus

AFP, Nablus

Three Palestinians were killed in the northern West Bank city of Nablus yesterday in two separate clashes between Israeli troops and stone-throwing demonstrators, Palestinian medics and witnesses said.

Early in the morning, Amjad Bilal al-Masri, 15, was killed by two bullets to the chest when Israeli troops opened fire on stone-throwing demonstrators in the city's old quarter, the scene of repeated search operations by the Israeli military over the past two weeks.

An Israeli military source said soldiers on patrol in Nablus had opened fire on a group of Palestinians "after they were attacked with stones".

"One Palestinian was hit," the

source said, adding that the soldiers had fired because they "felt themselves in danger".

An hour later, Amer Arafat, 18, and Rawahi Shuman, 25, were pronounced dead on arrival in hospital after coming under Israeli fire.

Witnesses said the two men were hit in the chest when troops fired live bullets to disperse stone-throwers.

An Israeli army spokesman said the soldiers had hit two Palestinians, one of them "armed" and the other preparing to throw a Molotov cocktail.

They had also fired on a third Palestinian who had detonated a bomb as a patrol passed but it was unclear whether he had been hit, the spokesman said. There were no casualties in the blast.

Two Palestinians had been

wounded, one of them critically, in a similar Israeli shooting in the city Friday evening. That incident followed the detonation of a bomb in an Israeli jeep passed.

Nabulus has been under Israeli military curfew for nine straight days and is the only West Bank city still under formal blockade, although ubiquitous roadblocks in the territory still make travel for Palestinians difficult.

Late Friday, Israeli troops pushed back into the town of Jenin farther north, scarcely 24 hours after lifting a four-month blockade there.

Around 15 jeeps and tanks moved into the city and began surrounding several houses in the eastern sector, provoking clashes with Palestinian gunmen, Palestinian security sources and witnesses said.

A new jolt of 3.5 on the Richter scale hit Ramallah Friday evening following 29 significant aftershocks in the first week after the massive tremor, IRNA said.

Iran seeks to turn quake city normal

AFP, Bam

Banks were reopening in Bam yesterday as the Iranian authorities sought to restore a semblance of normality to the quake-devastated town but efforts to move residents into large tent cities to ease aid distribution faced resistance.

Five schools were also due to reopen on Monday, the deputy regional director in charge of education, Abdolvahed Mostafavi, told the official IRNA news agency.

It appeared likely classes would take place under tents as most buildings have been destroyed or so severely damaged there are fears that the continuing aftershocks could bring them down.

"We have heard back today from the Iranians that given the current situation in Bam and all that is going on there now, it would be preferable to hold such a visit in abeyance. Therefore we are not pursuing it further at the moment," Ereli said.

It was unclear whether Iran's decision not to accept the visit

Iran declines Dole visit for now

REUTERS, Washington

reflected a calculated rebuff or simply bad timing.

Ereli declined to say whether a visit by Dole, a North Carolina Republican, might take place at some point in the future and he stressed the United States would keep providing humanitarian aid to Iran.

State Department spokesman Adam Ereli suggested the Iranian decision reflected the extremely difficult conditions in Bam after the Dec. 26 earthquake, which killed more than 30,000 people and left tens of thousands homeless.

The United States said its offer to send Dole, who has extensive experience grappling with humanitarian disasters from her stint heading the American Red Cross in the 1990s, was a humanitarian rather than a political gesture.

Washington cut ties with Tehran in 1980 after the Iranian revolution brought to power an anti-American government. The decision to sever ties was taken during the 1979 hostage crisis when Iranian students held 52 Americans for 444 days.

Tight security in Kashmir after attack on main station

AFP, Jammu

Security was tightened all over Indian Kashmir following a militant attack on the main railway station, the death toll from which increased overnight Saturday by one to seven, police said.

One policeman died overnight raising the total number of casualties among security personnel to five.

Two militants were killed in the attack and 20 people wounded including 17 train passengers in the three-hour gunbattle at Jammu's railway station, the main rail link for the region to India.

Deputy Inspector General of Police at Jammu, Farooq Ahmed, told AFP there were intelligence reports that militants were planning to attack key installations in Kashmir to derail India-Pakistan peace moves at an ongoing South Asia summit.

Afghan asylum seekers near death on Nauru

AFP, Wellington

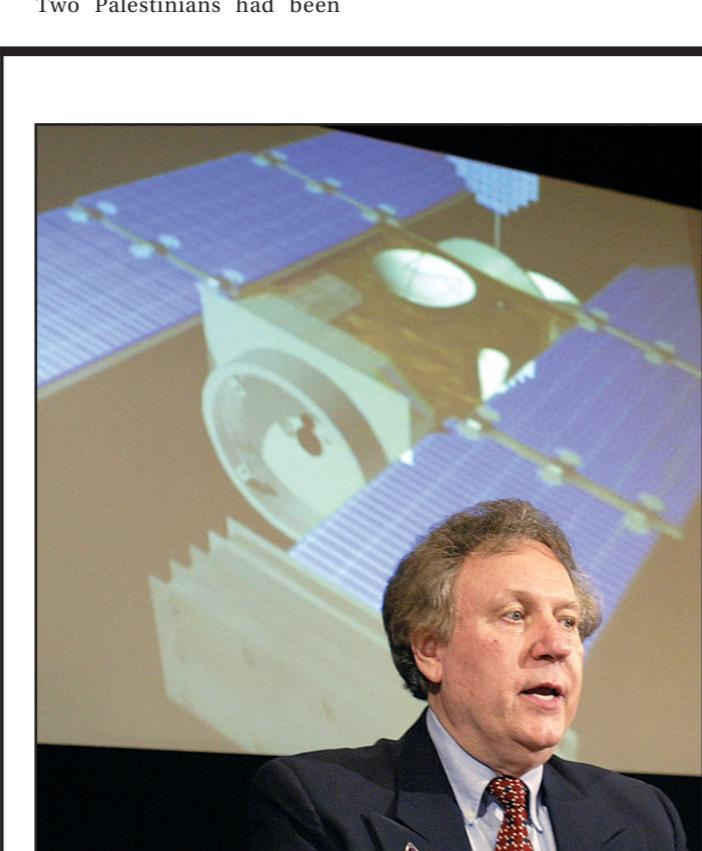
Hunger-striking asylum-seekers protesting their apparent life sentence on the near-bankrupt South Pacific island of Nauru, believe they will be dead within a week, according to New Zealand journalists who sneaked onto the island from which news media are banned.

"They are on death's door," said detainee Ali Madad Razai.

About 45 refugees began a hunger strike more than three weeks ago. They are among 284 mainly Afghans still on the island after being denied refugee status in Australia two-and-a-half years ago.

A photo of the hunger strikers showed two with their lips apparently sewn together, while one hunger-striker had heart problems and two had "rotten" sores on their legs, detainees were quoted as saying.

Most were said to be suffering severe kidney pain and were so weak they had to be carried about the camp on stretchers, and some were planning to sew their eyes.



Tom Duxbury, Stardust project manager, speaks at a press conference in front of an image of the Stardust spacecraft Friday at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratories in Pasadena, California.

Mars is the next stop

AP, Pasadena

A NASA spacecraft was closing in on Mars, carrying a six-wheeled vehicle that is to roam the Red Planet's rocky surface in search of geologic evidence that Mars was once suitable for life.

The spacecraft cradling the Spirit rover was scheduled to land yesterday night on Mars, alighting in an ancient crater just south of the planet's equator.

At the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, members of the mission braced themselves for the unmanned spacecraft's anticipated landing on Mars' reddish surface.

"It could be a long wait," Duxbury said.

If NASA does not hear from it by late Sunday, "We are in serious trouble," project manager Pete Theisinger said.

The \$820 million project also includes a twin rover, Opportunity, which is set to arrive on Mars on Jan. 24.

The camera- and instrument-laden rovers were designed to spend 90 days analysing Martian

rocks and soil for clues that could reveal whether the Red Planet was ever a warmer, wetter place capable of sustaining life.

Today, Mars is a dry and cold world. But ancient river channels and other water-carved features spied from orbit suggest that Mars may have had a more hospitable past.

"We see these intriguing hints Mars may have been a different place long ago," Duxbury said.

The rovers were not designed to look for life. Instead, NASA built them to prospect for evidence that liquid water, a necessary ingredient for life once persisted on the surface of the planet. A direct search for life on Mars is at least a decade away, NASA scientists said.

Together, the twin robots were launched in the most intensive scientific assault on another planetary body since the Apollo missions to the moon, said Orlando Figueroa, director of NASA's Mars exploration programme.