

'US near seizing Laden'

AP, Islamabad

The United States and its allies have moved closer to capturing Osama bin Laden in the last two months, a top US counterterrorism official said in a television interview broadcast Saturday.

"If he has a watch, he should be looking at it because the clock is ticking. He will be caught," Joseph Cofer Black, the US State Department coordinator for counterterrorism, told private Geo television network.

Asked if concrete progress had been made during the last two months when Pakistan has arrested dozens of terror suspects including some key al-Qaeda operatives Black said, "Yes, I would say this."

Black, who briefed a group of Pakistani journalists after talks with officials here Friday, said he could not predict exactly when bin Laden and other top al-Qaeda fugitives would be nabbed.

"What I tell people, I would be surprised but not necessarily shocked if we wake up tomorrow and he's been caught along with all his lieutenants. That can happen because of the programmes and infrastructure in place," he told Geo.

Bin Laden and his top associate, Ayman al-Zawahri, are believed to be hiding some place along the rugged border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Russians rage against local authorities

AFP, Beslan

There is undisguised fury against the police, the local authorities and special forces in the grieving Russian town of Beslan, where inhabitants blame them for the tragic end to the hostage siege.

"It's the president of Ossetia (the local region) who is to blame, he must pay for what he has done," says Timur, 30. "The terrorists for three days asked him to come and he always backed out. Look, he was elected to assume his responsibilities."

Next to Timur, a dignified-looking older gentleman in a felt hat echoes the feeling of many in a town which will now forever be associated with the bloodiest hostage crisis in Russia's history.

"It's the soldiers, the police, the special forces, the entire corrupt clique, incapable of fighting and reacting, it's they who have killed our children," he said, staring at the wall of the school of gymnasium where the hostages were held, now pock-marked with bullets.

The day after the siege ended with some 338 dead -- about half of them children -- families were still gathered in front of the House of Culture, the municipal building that became the focal point of their lives during the three-day drama.

Every time an Ossetian official appeared, the crowd pressed forward and demanded explanations that he simply cannot provide. "You have been lying from the start, why should we believe you today," yelled one woman, tears in her eyes.

Sometimes insults are shouted, above all by men. "These were children, our children, why was nothing ready, where were the ambulances that we were promised?" asked one. At the start of the siege, no such vehicle was visible near the school.

When regional government spokesman Lev Dzugayev appeared for his regular briefing of journalists, the relatives forced him to give lengthy explanations over decisions the crisis cell made.

"I insist on speaking to you in person. Your ministers need to answer for the death of my son," said a woman. Another asked if it is true that "it was the Ingush who renovated the school before the start of term" and are alleged to have planted explosives in advance.

Every one of Beslan's residents have their own versions of what happened at 1:00 pm on Friday, when the situation changed in an instant from one of mounting tension

to raging anarchy and abject horror.

For a former soldier slumped by a tree, staring at the school, "our helicopters fired on the roof of the school by mistake, and this was what made it cave in."

He added: "It was only when we saw the first hostages coming out that the armed forces went in. We shouldn't have just let it happen, they should have gone straight away to save the children," he said.

Mira had another theory. "My neighbour was a witness. After the explosions went off, the terrorists started to shoot at the children, and that is why our menfolk went on the attack. The Russian soldiers only arrived afterwards, we did not know who was shooting at whom."

Putin's emotional pre-dawn visit here left many people cold, along with his grave evening address on Russian television, that most did not bother to watch.

"What's the Kremlin supposed to do inside there, Putin isn't controlling anything here? What do you expect him to do?" asked Artium.

"In the end this is the business of the Caucasus. Something must be done, starting with building a wall to protect the Ossetians from the Ingush and the Chechens. Then we've got to pay back these terrorist bastards."



PHOTO: AFP

A woman cries in the ruins of the school gymnasium in Beslan, North Ossetia yesterday. The first funerals for the hundreds of hostages killed in the Russian school in Beslan took place yesterday. Some 400 people were killed as a result of the three-day school siege in southern Russia.



PHOTO: AFP

Representatives from Nepal's Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian communities participate in a march to appeal for religious tolerance and harmony outside the main Mosque in Kathmandu yesterday as security forces personnel look on.

3,000 Nepalis stage peace march as curfew relaxed

AFP, Kathmandu

Some 3,000 people from various religious groups in Nepal took advantage of the relaxation of a curfew to stage a peace march through the streets of the capital Kathmandu yesterday, organisers said.

Those taking part in the procession called for religious tolerance following rioting directed at Muslim targets in response to the grisly killing of 12 Nepalese hostages by Islamic insurgents in Iraq, said one organiser, Hemanta Sharma.

The peace marchers included Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists," Sharma said.

Demonstrators carried placards with slogans reading "Religious tolerance and national unity are Nepal's present need," witnesses said.

A group of people from various walks of life including artists, journalists, members of civil society and human rights activists separately held a peace meeting in the capital, lighting candles and praying for harmony.

The events were held after the

Nepalese government further eased a curfew imposed last week to quell the rioting.

The 10-hour let-up in the curfew was to allow people to buy food and get on with their normal business, the home ministry said early Sunday. Authorities had relaxed the curfew for eight hours on Saturday.

The curfew has been in place in Kathmandu and Lalitpur on the southern outskirts of the capital since Wednesday to stop angry mobs that had attacked mosques and Muslim businesses after 12 Nepalese youths were killed by Islamic militants who had held them hostage since August 19.

During the unrest police opened fire to disperse an angry crowd that tried to storm the Egyptian embassy, which represents Iraqi interests in the Himalayan kingdom.

At least two people were killed and more than 50 injured in the clashes between demonstrators and riot police.

However, there were no reports of violence overnight Saturday, police said.

Iraq extends ban on Al-Jazeera

AFP, Baghdad

The Iraqi government Saturday extended a ban on Al-Jazeera television and sealed the Baghdad office of the Arab news channel, charging it had not complied with a temporary ban clamped on grounds of incitement to violence.

Al-Jazeera expressed its outrage at the move and a reported raid by Iraqi security forces on its Baghdad bureau to seal the building.

On August 5, the Qatar-based news channel was ordered to close its Baghdad office for a month on charges of advocating violence, inciting hatred and racial tension.

"During this temporary closure the government of Iraq had expected the Al-Jazeera management to offer an explanation to the presented allegations or to officially request a description of the possible threat that the channel may be posing. However, none of this has happened," said a statement from the office of interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.

Gaza governor's office seized by gunmen

Hamas backs polls

REUTERS, AFP, Gaza

Masked gunmen briefly seized the Palestinian governor's office in a southern Gaza Strip town yesterday, demanding compensation for Israeli raids in a protest that added to signs of growing lawlessness.

The territory has been gripped by unprecedented turmoil amid demands for Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to enact anti-corruption reforms and a tussle for control ahead of an Israeli plan to quit the occupied Gaza Strip.

Gunmen took over the governor's office in Khan Younis early on Sunday to demand compensation from Arafat's Palestinian Authority for destruction caused by Israeli raids.

They left about an hour later after authorities promised to set up a mechanism to compensate Palestinian homeless.

The gunmen said they were not from any of the militant groups waging a 4-year-old uprising.

But rather they came from a neighborhood where Israeli troops dynamited two apartment blocks last week. The army raid followed twin Palestinian bus bombings, which killed 16 people inside Israel last week.

"We need homes for the homeless," Abu Mujahed, a spokesman for the gunmen told Reuters, adding

that 160 families had been made homeless by the latest Israeli demolition and previous raids.

"We are asking President Arafat to stand beside our fair demands," he said, adding that talks had begun with local officials to try to end the standoff.

Unrest which began in the Gaza Strip late in July and also touched the West Bank has posed the biggest internal challenge to Arafat's leadership since he returned from exile a decade ago as Palestinians gained a measure of self-rule.

AFP adds: The Islamist movement Hamas gave its backing yesterday for plans to hold elections next year, urging Palestinians to register for the polls which it is expected to contest for the first time.

"Hamas is asking all the Palestinian people to register to vote in the elections," the organisation said in a statement.

"We in Hamas regard elections as a way to lay the foundations for a community built on the pillars of freedom, stability and justice," it added.

Palestinian officials announced on Saturday that they planned to hold simultaneous presidential, parliamentary and municipal polls in spring 2005.

fatwa issued for release of French reporters

Crisis talks in Paris as concerns grow

AFP, Baghdad

A senior cleric from the strict Wahhabist current of Islam in Iraq yesterday issued a fatwa (Islamic decree) demanding the captors of two French reporters free them immediately.

"We issued a fatwa urging the group to immediately free and not to harm the two French reporters, in recognition of France's position on Iraq," Sheikh Mehdi al-Sumaidaie told AFP.

The cleric, an influential figure among the extremist Sunni Muslim organisations responsible for the bulk of kidnappings in Iraq lately, also lambasted the Iraqi government and US forces for staging a raid in the area where the pair was kidnapped, saying it had harmed efforts for their release.

"The attack on Latifiya disrupted the process of their release," he said.

Meanwhile, as hopes dimmed that two French journalists held

captive in Iraq would be freed soon, French President Jacques Chirac was to discuss the crisis yesterday with his foreign minister, who returned from a mission to the Middle East with no news of their imminent release.

Rumours had been swirling recently in Baghdad, Amman and Paris that journalists Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot would be freed within days, but the return to Paris late Saturday of Foreign Minister Michel Barnier suggested their release was on hold.

Barnier urged "patience" over the crisis.

"As always in these types of circumstances, you must take care in analysing the information..." he told the newspaper Le Journal du Dimanche. "I would be irresponsible if I made a prediction" on when they would be released.

He had been in the region since Monday and had hoped to be able to accompany the two men home.

Lanka raises peace hopes despite killing

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels and the opposition are voicing fears the country is again on the brink of war, but a shift in parliament has raised hopes the faltering peace process can still be salvaged.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has vowed to prevent renewed fighting with the Tigers despite peace broker Norway's recent warning a truce which froze the war is "melting."

"The government is totally committed to doing all that is within its power to not allow the situation to degrade to military action," Kumaratunga told Colombo-based foreign correspondents shortly after returning from Europe on Friday.

She said Norwegian peace envoys had been positive about their latest efforts to jump start negotiations which remain suspended since the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) walked out in April last year.

"I don't think the LTTE has much to gain by going back to war," Kumaratunga said, adding the Tigers

too were concerned about an international backlash if they sparked a resumption of war.

However, Kumaratunga accused the Tigers of killing at least 250 rivals despite a truce in effect since February 2002. She said the number of their truce violations had gone down since her new government came to power in April.

Norwegian peace envoy Erik Solheim is expected here next week to keep up Oslo's shuttle diplomacy to try to revive face-to-face talks between the Colombo government and the Tamil Tigers, diplomats said.

They said Solheim met last week with the main LTTE negotiator based in London, Anton Balasingham, and discussed ways to kick start talks, but there had been no breakthrough.

Balasingham told Tamil daily the Sudaroli the future of the peace process was in the hands of Kumaratunga and there was no point blaming the LTTE for a spate of killings here as well as in the island's embattled east.

Pakistan liquor tragedy toll mounts to 25

AFP, Multan

At least 25 people have died after drinking home-made liquor in central Pakistan, police and hospital officials said yesterday.

The victims were mostly young people who had bought the liquor from local agents operating secretly in Multan in Punjab province, said doctor Shabbir Nasir of the city's Nishtar Hospital.

"Initial reports said the casualties were caused as the liquor contained methylated spirit which hit their kidneys and eyesight," he added.

Hospital chief Imran Rafiq told AFP by telephone: "At least 14 people died in Multan on Saturday."

Seven others died in Kot Addu, 100km west of Multan, and two each in the nearby towns of Alipur and Muzaffargarh, district police officer Hamid Mukhtar Gondal said.

In Kot Addu, where some friends had organised a party, five people died soon after drinking the contaminated liquor while two others died on their way to hospital, police said.

Massive hurricane smothers Florida

Bush declares major disaster, 1.3 million homes & businesses without power

REUTERS, Cocoa

Hurricane Frances smothered eastern Florida yesterday with drenching rains and fierce winds that ripped away roofs, trees and boat moorings and cut power to 1.3 million homes and businesses.

The center of the Texas-sized storm made landfall at about 1 a.m. EDT (0500 GMT) on Sunday near Sewall's Point, Florida, on the Atlantic coast about 100 miles north of Miami, the National Hurricane Center said.

The hurricane had roared onto the coast, from which 2.5 million people had been told to flee, late on Saturday after pounding the Bahamas for two days.

Frances promised to dump torrential rain on the Florida peninsula for up to 15 hours, in what emergency officials said could be a

"marathon" of anxiety and devastation as the storm moved across the state.

Winds reached 105 mph (170 kph), and the slow-moving storm picked up some speed as it marched inland at about 8 mph (13 kph).

In Florida's central Atlantic coast counties, blinding rain squalls drove clouds of sand into the air while huge whitecaps thundered onto the beaches. Palm trees rained coconuts and then toppled over as the eye wall, the most powerful area of the storm bordering the calm eye, moved ashore.

In hard-hit Palm Beach County, boats broke from their moorings and were dragged by the wind until they snagged on bridges or other obstacles. Power lines snapped and sparked while lightning illuminated blacked-out beach towns and flood

waters submerged cars in low-lying parking garages.

The hurricane covered much of the state. Forecasters said the storm's huge eye could take 12 hours to pass, and they warned people not to take false comfort in the respite as the brutal second half of the storm approached.

"People do need to be very careful when those winds do slacken off in the eye. We've still got the back side to deal with," said National Hurricane Center director Max Mayfield.

President Bush on Saturday declared Florida "a major disaster" and ordered federal aid to make grants and loans available in five coastal counties in Central Florida: Brevard, Indian River, Martin, Palm Beach and St. Lucie.



PHOTO: AFP

Trees lay in the road after being felled by high winds from Hurricane Frances Saturday at Lantana in Palm Beach County, Florida.

Kerry, Bush duel over medicare, terror war

REUTERS, Akron

Democrat John Kerry criticized President Bush on Saturday for burying a record jump in Medicare premiums in a pre-holiday announcement that came during a rush of news at home and abroad.

Bush, jumping to an 11-point lead over his Democratic challenger in new polls, focused on the war on terror, an issue in which voter surveys show him with a clear lead as he seeks a second term in the Nov. 2 election.

On a campaign swing in Ohio and Pennsylvania, Bush said the hostage siege at a Russian school in which 322 people, almost half of them children, were killed, was a "grim reminder of the nature of the

terrorists we face."

"That is why this country must be strong and diligent and never yielding. We must bring them to justice," Bush told a rally at a high school in Broadview Heights, Ohio.

A Newsweek poll released on Saturday showed the Bush/Cheney ticket beating Kerry/Edwards by 52 percent to 41 percent in a three-way race with independent candidate Ralph Nader -- a 13-point bounce for Bush since mid-August.

Bush had an identical lead in a Time magazine poll on Friday following months of polls that showed him and Kerry running neck and neck.

Kerry, also campaigning in the pivotal electoral state of Ohio that Bush won narrowly in 2000, empha-

sized issues like the economy and health care where the president is seen as vulnerable.

The Massachusetts senator questioned the timing of the Bush administration's announcement late on Friday -- before the Labor Day holiday weekend -- that older Americans must pay 17 percent more next year for their government-run health insurance.

"He promised again a couple of nights ago to strengthen Medicare," Kerry told a rally at a baseball stadium in Akron. "Then you wake up when a lot of the news is being hidden by what's happening in the hurricane down in Florida, what's happening in Russia with 200 people tragically killed by terrorists."