

FBI hunts Chinese 'terror gang'

BBC ONLINE

The FBI wants to question four Chinese nationals amid fears of a plot to explode a "dirty bomb" in Boston.

Police and FBI agents in Massachusetts were issued with photographs of two men and two women wanted in connection with an "unspecified threat".

Earlier on Wednesday US TV networks reported that agents with radiological sensors were on patrol in Boston.

The FBI and city officials in Boston played down fears, saying reports of a dirty bomb were "unsubstantiated".

The four Chinese were named as Zengrong Lin, Wen Qun Zheng, Xiujin Chen and Guozhi Lin.

None of the four were understood to have appeared on FBI "watchlists".

The FBI issued a statement acknowledging that an "unspecified" threat had been received, adding that the information came from "an unknown and uncorroborated source regarding an unspecified potential threat".



On the eve of his second term inauguration, US President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura stand with twin daughter Barbara (L) and Jenna (2L) during the Black Tie & Boots Ball Wednesday in Washington, DC. With the US capital blanketed by tight security and newly fallen snow, Bush will launch his second term mindful of a legacy shaped by the war on terrorism and Iraq.

World leaders hoping for int'l consensus as Bush embarks on 2nd term

AFP, London

US President George W. Bush embarks on his second term in office with world leaders expressing hope yesterday that future relations with Washington will be marked by more openness and greater consensus on the international level. "It is possible to construct an international agenda that is more consensual, more multilateral than what has gone before," British Prime Minister Tony Blair said in an interview published yesterday in the daily The Guardian.

"Evolution comes with experience," he said.

Bush will take the oath in the US capital Thursday, in the 55th US presidential swearing-in and the first since the September 11 attacks three years ago transformed the world and shaped the US presidency around issues of terrorism and the Iraq war.

France, whose relations with Washington soured after it refused to join the US-led coalition to topple Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, said it hoped Bush's second term will be marked by mutual respect.

"It is not just France that must make concessions. A new relationship means that we respect each other. We are allies," French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier told CNN television Thursday in an interview to mark Bush's inauguration.

"The French want to move on, and so do the Americans. To do that our discussions must be open, direct and clear. Each must take a step to the other," he said.

Referring to the widespread criticism of France in the American press, he said: "It is not fair always to make a caricature of France. Just because the French say something, it doesn't mean it is wrong."

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis

Rodriguez Zapatero, whose government has also had tenuous relations with Washington, said he hoped Bush's second term would lead to more dialogue.

"I can understand that President Bush has been upset by the decisions taken by my government," Zapatero said late Wednesday in his first televised interview since becoming prime minister in April of last year.

"I withdrew Spanish troops (from Iraq) because that was the wish of Spaniards and because the decision went along 100 percent with my own beliefs."

He said he nonetheless hoped for warmer relations with Bush.

"Lately I have picked up some positive signals, especially coming from the new secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, who spoke of a new era of dialogue, rather than monologue," Zapatero said.

Guinea leader 'survives' coup bid'

BBC ONLINE

Shots fired at a convoy carrying Guinea's ailing President Lansana Conte were an assassination attempt, his security minister says.

"There was an attempt on the life of the head of state, but the assassins did not hit their target," Moussa Sampil told Radio France International.

Sampil said that the president was unhurt and that a number of people had been detained.

Security has been tightened around the presidential palace.

The incident happened a year after the president was sworn in for a third term, following his victory in controversial elections.

Details of the incident are still sketchy, but the BBC's Al Hassan Sillah in Conakry says shots were fired as the convoy passed through a neighbourhood of the capital known as Enco 5 at around 1500 (1500 GMT).

It is not known who fired the shots or whether they hit any of the vehicles in the president's convoy.

'Britain urging US to come up with Iraq pullout timetable'

AFP, London

Britain is urging the United States to announce a possible timetable for the withdrawal of the countries' troops from Iraq, a London-based newspaper reported yesterday.

British officials believe that the time has come to give an "indicative timetable" for departure over the next 18 months or so, the Daily Telegraph said, citing unnamed sources.

There would be no firm deadline for the withdrawal, and it would depend on Iraqi armed forces becoming able to deal with security in the country, meaning foreign troops would not leave until around mid-2006, the report said.

Thus far, no definite date has been proposed for US and British forces to quit Iraq.

British officials argue that how ever tentative a timetable, it would boost Iraq's transitional government and undermine claims from

insurgents that Washington intends to occupy the nation indefinitely, the paper said.

"Giving a timetable would be an important political signal that we intend to leave Iraq," what was named as a "well-placed Whitehall source" -- meaning an official rather than a member of the government -- told the newspaper.

"The main Iraqi parties are already talking about when coalition forces should be drawn down. American knows it will have to deal with the issue soon."

Britain's government was hopeful that Washington could be prodded into making a formal announcement within the next few months, the report added.

On Wednesday, the New York Times said that after Iraq's January 30 elections, the country's new administration would ask the United States to set a timetable for withdrawal.

British soldiers' prisoner abuse trial halted

REUTERS, Osnabrueck, Germany

The trial in Germany of British soldiers accused of abusing Iraqi prisoners has been halted at the request of the defence.

"The trial has been halted because of the defence application," Prime Minister Tony Blair's spokesman said without elaborating.

Photos published this week, including some that show the soldiers, appear to show naked detainees being forced to simulate anal and other sex acts.

Blair, a staunch advocate of the US-led Iraq invasion to oust Saddam Hussein, has told Parliament he found the pictures "shocking and appalling".

The case echoes the scandal involving US soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, which severely tarnished the US's image in the Arab world and elsewhere.

"While we express in a unified way our disgust at those pictures, I hope that we do not allow that to tarnish the good name, fully deserved, of our British armed forces," Blair said.

Rice acknowledges bad Iraq decisions

REUTERS, Washington

Secretary of State-designate Condoleezza Rice, in a rare acknowledgment of mistakes, said on Wednesday the Bush administration had made some bad decisions in Iraq and was unprepared for stabilising the country.

The admission came during her confirmation hearing at the US Senate Foreign Relations committee where she was approved by a 16-to-2 vote as the first black woman to become the top US diplomat despite Democrats' criticism over the Iraq war.

Republicans had hoped to have swift confirmation of Rice in the full Senate with little or no discussion shortly after President Bush is sworn in for a second four-year term on Thursday.

But Democrats balked, saying they hoped to have nine hours of debate on the Senate floor that is likely to include sharp criticism of the administration on Iraq. This debate will push the vote into next

week.

Democrats on the committee complained the Bush administration was unwilling to learn from its mistakes to change policies in Iraq, be candid about the cost of continued deployment and develop a better exit strategy.

"We have made a lot of decisions in this period of time. Some of them have been good, some of them have not been good, some of them have been bad decisions, I am sure," Rice told the committee.

The 50-year-old former Stanford University provost did not specify what the bad decisions were but said in at least one case, "We didn't have the right skills, the right capacity, to deal with a reconstruction effort of this kind."

Bush's national security adviser for the last four years, Rice also acknowledged the State Department's intelligence arm dissented before the war over some information about Iraq's weapons capability and needed to be listened to more.



A Philippine activist group burns photographs of US President George W. Bush during a protest near the US embassy in Manila yesterday denouncing Bush on the eve of his inauguration. The Philippines is a staunch ally of the US-led war on terror, but Bush's popularity among Filipinos has dipped following a spate of abduction of foreigners in Iraq, including two Filipinos last year.



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi children enjoy a ride on a large swing on first day of Eid-ul-Azha in central Baghdad yesterday. Muslims all over the world pray visit loved ones at cemeteries, cleaning the grave and praying over their souls, and slaughter sheep to mark the end of the Hajj or pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia, one of the five pillars of Islam.

Pilgrims 'stone Satan' as Muslims mark Eid

AFP, Mina

Some 2.5 million Muslims yesterday took part in the "Stoning of Satan" ritual, as the Islamic world marked the Eid-ul-Azha feast of sacrifice following the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Makkah.

The pilgrims were stoning one of the "jamarat", or three pillars symbolising the devil, in the ultimate but also the most dangerous ritual of the Hajj that last year saw 251 people killed in a stampede.

Ahead of Eid-ul-Azha, the faithful went to Muzdalifa, 10km from Makkah, to collect the stones used for the ceremony.

Then in Mina, also near Makkah, the faithful approached the pillars -- standing in ditches several metres (yards) deep behind a fence or on a bridge built over the site for extra security -- to stone the target.

According to tradition, it is the place where Satan appeared first to Abraham, to his son, Ishmael, and to Ishmael's mother Hagar. All three pillars are to be stoned as the ritual resumes on Friday and Saturday.

Last year saw 251 pilgrims trampled or suffocated to death during a stampede as they vied to hurl pebbles at the pillars.

"Thanks to God, the stoning of the jamarat is taking place in the best possible manner," Information Minister Fuad al-Farsi, on the scene in Mina, told AFP.

He praised the 28-million-dollar modernisation programme carried out since last year's disaster to make it easier for pilgrims to throw their pebbles and the extra cameras installed to allow the flow to be monitored.

The Hajj reached its climax Wednesday with some 2.56 million pilgrims from around the world converging on Mount Arafat, according to interior ministry figures.

The faithful -- men clad in a two-piece seamless white cloth, the women covered except for the hands and face -- spent the day praying for forgiveness in a symbolic enactment of the Final Judgement at the scene of the Prophet Mohammed (SM)'s last sermon 14 centuries ago.

Ukraine SC confirms Yushchenko victory

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's Supreme Court rejected a final appeal over Viktor Yushchenko's election as president yesterday, clearing the way for the pro-Western reformer to assume power in the ex-Soviet nation after weeks of political turmoil.

"The court has concluded that the complaint should not be granted," read the eagerly-awaited ruling on an appeal filed by defeated candidate, former prime minister Viktor Yanukovich.

"The decision is final and cannot be appealed," chief presiding justice Anatoly Yaroma said in reading the decision that sparked applause from one side and resigned indignation from the other. The ruling freed parliament to set a date for Yushchenko's inauguration, which top ally Petro Poroshenko said has been tentatively scheduled for noon on Sunday in Kiev.

Yushchenko's swearing-in will cap months of political turmoil and uncertainty that have roiled this strategic ex-Soviet nation on European Union's eastern border.

China races to save hostages in Iraq

Rebels mount pre-election attacks

AFP, Baghdad

Rebels mounted attacks to scare people away from the polls in Iraq's landmark January 30 elections as a two-day deadline for the execution of eight Chinese nationals was due to expire yesterday.

A Brazilian national was reported missing in Iraq after an ambush north of Baghdad by rebels who killed a Briton and his Iraqi colleague.

Insurgents intensified their intimidation campaign as the Al-Qaeda linked Army of Ansar al-Sunna released footage purporting to show the execution of two Iraqis working for a US company on preparations for the vote.

The latest gruesome displays followed a seven-car bomb rampage around Iraq Wednesday that claimed the lives of 20 people and targeted the country's army and police, who have lost more than

1,300 men to insurgent attacks.

Rebels are betting a wave of bloodshed will discredit the country's first free elections in half a century and the first since the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003.

Meanwhile, China was counting on an association of Muslim clerics, with reputed links to the insurgency, to save their eight nationals held hostage, as the deadline for their execution neared.

Diplomats from China's embassy in Baghdad were in talks with the Committee of Muslim Scholars and its chairman Harith Al-Dhari, who helped in the release of seven Chinese taken hostage last April, the Xinhua news agency said.

"All of the Iraqi people know the attitude of the Chinese people toward the Iraqi issue, and I am optimistic that the kidnapped Chinese will be released soon," the

chairman told the agency in the Iraqi capital.

"As long as the kidnappers claim themselves to be an Islamic party, I feel that the lives of the kidnapped are not in danger," he said.

Dhari's organisation issued a statement "calling on all the kidnapping powers to release all those held hostage in Iraq" to mark the Muslim feast of Eid-ul-Azha.

Kidnappers released footage Tuesday to the Arabic news channel Al-Jazeera of the eight hostages holding Chinese passports and standing against a mud brick wall flanked by two masked gunmen.

They were seized last week as they made their way to Jordan.

The China Daily said the insurgents were from the Movement of the Islamic Resistance Nuamaan Brigade and had threatened to execute the men unless Beijing "clarifies its role" in Iraq within 48 hours of the video's broadcast.

IRANIAN AMBASSADOR SAYS US attack on Iran would destabilise world

AFP, London

A US attack on Iran would deepen the isolation of the superpower, further damage its image abroad and destabilise the world, the Iranian ambassador to Britain said yesterday.

"The United States should take lessons from its past mistakes and adopt a more responsible attitude and have a more multilateral approach towards the world issues," Seyed Mohammad Hossein Adeli told BBC Radio.

"Waging war against Muslims and ignoring its allies, including the Europeans, created tensions, instability, a less secure world and created an ocean of mistrust between the United States and the rest of the world."

"So they would like to continue launching a war against the Muslim world and others? I don't think this would do good to the American image and to the American cause," he said.

The comments come as

Washington ratcheted up rhetoric against the Islamic regime over its controversial nuclear program.

On Monday President George W. Bush said he could not rule out resorting to military action if the United States failed to persuade Iran to abandon the program, which Washington charges is a cover for developing the atomic bomb.

Tehran maintains its nuclear programme is directed at generating electricity.

"The Americans unfortunately are continuing to do false accusations on Iran," Adeli said, stressing that the diplomatic route, rather than a US headline, was leading to effective negotiations.

The diplomat said Tehran had the right to develop nuclear technologies.

"Every nation is entitled to have sophisticated technologies. We have respected all of our international commitments. Therefore there is no reason why we should not have it," he said.

Powell says goodbye to State Dept employees

AFP, Washington

After four years as the top US diplomat, an emotional Colin Powell on Wednesday bade farewell to State Department employees with a speech in which he hailed US successes from Iraq to Afghanistan, in Asia and on AIDS.

Hundreds of State Department employees, from high-ranking diplomats to cafeteria workers, gathered in a conference room at the State Department to send off Powell under a large sign reading: "Secretary Powell, Thank You, From Everyone."

Powell listed what he said were some of the administration's key successes from the fight against terrorism to ousting the Taliban in Afghanistan and toppling Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

"Though the task is difficult, ... we will see to it that these two nations, Afghanistan and Iraq, have the freedom and democracy that their people richly deserve. And that will happen, and you have had a lot to do with that," he said.



PHOTO: AFP
Alma Powell (L) and US Deputy Secretary of State Armitage (2nd-L) listen as US Secretary of State Colin Powell (L) speaks during his farewell address in the main lobby of the US State Department building Wednesday in Washington DC.

US troops sees end to tsunami relief

Survivors utter worry

REUTERS, Banda Aceh

US forces said they were prepared to wind down tsunami relief efforts in Asia despite fears that some survivors were still desperate for help after a disaster that killed more than 226,000 people.

US Pacific Command chief Admiral Thomas Fargo said that almost four weeks after the tsunami, relief work was shifting to reconstruction and it was time to gradually cut the military deployment, which has involved some 16,500 US personnel and the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln.

"We still start right now transferring functions to the appropriate host nation and international organisations," Fargo told reporters in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday.

In hard-hit northern areas of Indonesia's Sumatra island, which was directly in the path of the killer wave on Dec. 26, relief officials said some remote areas were still not getting aid and that bodies were still being discovered.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, has been the worst hit by the disaster and its most staunchly Islamic region, northern Aceh province, has borne the brunt. With the major Muslim festival of Eid-ul-Azha due on Friday, few in Aceh appeared to have anything to celebrate beyond survival.

Indonesia increased its official death count by a staggering 50,000 on Wednesday as people formerly listed as missing were counted as casualties.

The new data raised Indonesia's toll to 166,000 and put global deaths at more than 225,000 -- making the tsunami one of the eight deadliest natural disasters in history. Over 38,000 were killed in Sri Lanka, 16,000 in India and 5,300 in Thailand.

US military commanders said they nevertheless expected most military aid work to be shifted to other groups by the end of February, although key operations such as ferrying aid supplies by helicopter would likely be the last to go.