

9/11 report cites warnings about hijackings: NYT

REUTERS, Washington

US aviation officials failed to respond to dozens of warnings of a possible threat to airliners months before the Sept. 11 attacks, according to a previously undisclosed report by the commission probing the assault, The New York Times reported yesterday.

The commission report said federal aviation officials reviewed 52 intelligence reports between April and Sept. 10 that warned about Osama bin Laden or al-Qaeda, the newspaper said.

The panel's report took the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to task for failing to take steps that could have deterred the attacks, the newspaper said.

The newspaper cited the report as saying that aviation officials had amassed so much information about the terrorist threat that they held classified briefings in mid-2001 for security officials at 19 of the busiest US airports to warn of the danger posed in particular by bin Laden.

Still, the commission concluded that aviation officials did not direct adequate resources or attention to the problem, the Times said.

Saudis start voting in landmark election

REUTERS, Riyadh

Saudi men started voting in municipal elections in the capital Riyadh yesterday, the first stage in an unprecedented nationwide vote in the absolute monarchy which is inching toward reform.

"It took a long time to get here but we've broken through a psychological barrier that we couldn't deal with ballot boxes," said university professor Sulaiman Enezi, as he raised his arms in triumph after casting his vote.

The polls are part of a cautious program of reform introduced by de facto ruler Crown Prince Abdullah, who has faced growing calls for change from domestic activists and Saudi Arabia's main ally, the United States.

Critics say the elections are largely a cosmetic response to reform demands. But diplomats say the vote will at least create a mechanism for Saudis to channel concerns and complaints.

Khatami warns US of 'burning hell'

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami warned yesterday that any invader would be met by a "burning hell" as tens of thousands of people braved snow blizzards to join rallies for the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

"All the people of Iran are united against any attack and any threats," Khatami told a rally in the snow-bound capital. "Any invader will find Iran to be a burning hell for them."

As the clerical regime marked the 26th anniversary of the revolution that ousted the US-backed shah, Iranians were urged to turn out en masse and give a show of unity in the face of mounting international pressure over its nuclear programme.

Tens of thousands gathered around Azadi square in central Tehran despite the fierce cold and snow to hear Khatami step up the rhetoric in the escalating war of words between Iran and the United States.

Washington has hinted at military action against Tehran, accusing the regime of seeking to develop nuclear weapons.

Israeli-Palestinian talks postponed

Abbas orders halt to attacks

AFP, Ramallah

Talks between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators yesterday to discuss the implementation of agreements reached at this week's Middle East peace summit have been shelved by Israel after a series of mortar attacks in the southern Gaza Strip, a Palestinian official said.

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas responded by giving orders to his security forces to halt the attacks, which come just days after the ceasefire was agreed with Israel at a landmark summit in Egypt.

"The Israelis have informed us that they are postponing the meeting because of the mortar attacks and the security situation in the Gaza Strip," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"The meeting will now take place on Saturday evening or on Sunday," he added.

The meeting had been due to bring Palestinian negotiations

minister Saeb Erakat and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's top advisor Dov Weisglass together to discuss the details agreed on at Tuesday's summit in Egypt.

At the summit, Sharon and Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas both declared an end to four years of violence which has claimed some 4,700 lives.

However the firing of around 30 mortars and rockets on Thursday by the radical Islamist group Hamas in the Gaza Strip, where thousands of Palestinian security forces have deployed with instructions to stop such attacks, has underlined the challenge facing Abbas to rein in the militants.

Israeli cabinet minister Matan Vilnai said that the firing at the main Gush Katif settlement bloc in southern Gaza represents the first real challenge for the Palestinian leadership of its ceasefire commitment.

"There are forces who will do everything to prevent the disengagement process," he told army

radio in reference to Sharon's Gaza pullout plan.

"It is extremely serious. It is a real test for the Palestinian leadership, which can deal with it. Within a short period we must see an operation by them that stops such things," added the minister without portfolio.

Three more mortar shells were fired by Palestinian militants at a settlement in the Gaza Strip Thursday in another act of defiance against a new ceasefire pledge, Israeli military sources said.

After the latest firing, a statement from Abbas's office said he had given "firm instructions" to his security forces to halt the attacks.

"President Abbas has issued firm instructions to the security services to fully assume their responsibilities in the face of any violation of the period of calm" agreed on between Abbas and militants groups such as Hamas, it said.



PHOTO: AFP

A Saudi man casts his vote at a polling station in Riyadh yesterday. Saudi men went to the polls in the country's first ever election, a municipal vote barred to women that represents a cautious initial step towards democracy in the ultra-conservative kingdom. The ballot is part of a drive to introduce limited reforms, which Riyadh insists must be tailored to Saudi specifications and not necessarily follow a Western pattern.

Iraq to close borders to thwart attacks

9 killed in violence, 20 bodies of drivers recovered

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

Iraq said yesterday it would seal its borders next week to prevent Shia pilgrims from flooding into the country, in the latest emergency measure intended to thwart insurgent violence.

The bodies of more than 20 Iraqi drivers and security forces were found in their burnt out convoy south of Baghdad yesterday while eight others killed in separate violent attacks.

The borders will be closed between Feb. 17 and Feb. 22, in a move a government spokesman said was designed to coincide with the climax of Ashura, a major Shia religious ceremony.

Millions of Shias travel across the region to holy sites in Iraq for Ashura, during which many parade and beat themselves in homage to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in 680 AD.

Suicide bombers attacked pilgrims last year in Baghdad and Kerbala, killing at least 171 people.

"During these dates people will

flood to Iraq from neighboring countries because of Ashura, which will make it difficult to ensure the safety of Iraqis and the visitors," government spokesman Thaeer al-Naqib told Reuters.

Naqib said foreign pilgrims should make sure they arrived before the borders closed.

The government, battling a raging insurgency, has adopted special laws that allow it to declare curfews, close borders and detain suspects without normal legal process.

Drivers trying to enter Iraq from Syria, Iran and Jordan say that many border crossings are already shut, meaning foreign Shias will struggle to make the holy journey this year.

Insurgent attacks killed nine Iraqis yesterday. A car bomb in central Baghdad left three civilians dead and a US army spokesman said the blast may have been aimed at an American convoy that passed by shortly before.

The bodies of more than 20 Iraqi drivers and security forces were found in their burnt out convoy south of Baghdad yesterday, as a car bomb killed at least three in the capital's

centre.

The bodies were found in a convoy of government trucks carrying sugar, which police said they believed was attacked at least two days ago and the bodies left to rot.

"This morning a police patrol was in the Suwairah region and found about 20 vehicles that were taking sugar to Baghdad. They were all burned," said a police official, requesting anonymity.

Suwairah is about 60km south of Baghdad, on the edge of the Sunni insurgent area known as the "triangle of death".

As well as the drivers, two policemen and two soldiers who were protecting the convoy were also killed, the official told AFP.

"The bodies were rotting in the vehicles which indicates the attack was at least two days ago," he added.

He said there were no US casualties but the explosion scattered tangled metal and wreckage across Tahrir Square, a major intersection lined with shops and market stalls.

N Korea to build more nukes

Pyongyang says no to 6-nation nuclear bomb talks

AFP, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday it had manufactured nuclear weapons to protect itself against a US attack and that it was suspending its participation in multilateral talks aimed at dismantling its atomic programmes.

In a dramatic rejection of the second administration of US President George W. Bush, North Korea said it would no longer engage in dialogue with the United States over its nuclear programs.

The North Korean foreign ministry statement carried by the official KCNA news agency also said the country would seek to strengthen its nuclear arsenal, accusing the United States of plotting to overthrow its government.

The statement was North Korea's first official response to what was widely seen as conciliatory gesture to Pyongyang from President Bush in his State of the Union address last week.

Three years ago Bush denounced the communist country as part of an "axis of evil" along with Iran and Iraq. This time he avoided inflammatory language and said Washington was working closely with its allies to resolve the nuclear standoff.

North Korea said late last year it would not consider returning to dia-

logue until Bush had mapped out his second administration's policy towards it.

The statement was a clear rejection of Bush and his team and North Korea took special aim at US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who branded North Korea an "outpost of tyranny" during her confirmation hearing last month.

"The Bush administration termed the DPRK (North Korea), its dialogue partner, an 'outpost of tyranny,' putting into the shade its hostile policy, and totally rejected it. This deprived the DPRK of any justification to participate in the six-party talks," the statement said.

Pyongyang has boasted publicly in the past of possessing a nuclear deterrent and has vowed never to dismantle its atomic arsenal unless the United States drops its "hostile" policy towards the Stalinist country.

Washington believes North Korea possesses one or two crude bombs and may have reprocessed enough plutonium from spent fuel rods at its Yongbyon nuclear complex to produce enough plutonium for half-a-dozen more.

"The second-term Bush administration's intention to antagonize the DPRK and isolate and stifle it at any

cost has become quite clear," the statementsaid.

"Its nuclear weapons will remain nuclear deterrent for self-defence under any circumstances."

"We have wanted the six-party talks but we are compelled to suspend our participation in the talks for an indefinite period...", it said.

North Korea would also take "a measure to bolster its nuclear weapons arsenal" in order to protect its system, the statement said.

"The US disclosed its attempt to topple the political system in the DPRK (North Korea) at any cost, threatening it with a nuclear stick."

"This compels us to take a measure to bolster its nuclear weapons arsenal in order to protect the ideology, system, freedom and democracy chosen by the people in the DPRK."

The nuclear standoff erupted in October 2002 when the United States accused North Korea of operating a program based on highly enriched uranium, violating a 1994 arms control agreement. Pyongyang denied that charge but restarted a plutonium program.

North Korea attended three rounds of the six-nation talks, which also group China, South Korea, the United States, Japan and Russia. But it

shunned a fourth round set for last September, complaining of "hostile" US policies.

The communist state said previously that it would await the formation of Bush's foreign policy team before deciding on whether to return to six-party talks and the statement came as the United States and its allies stepped up diplomacy to relaunch a new round.

South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon left for Washington Thursday for talks with Rice.

In Tokyo, John Bolton, US under-secretary of state for arms control and international security, accused North Korea of continuing its weapons programme.

"The absence of progress in six-party talks means they are making further progress toward their increased capability" in weapons, he said.

He said Washington has not imposed a deadline for Pyongyang to return to the table.

Bolton, speaking hours before the announcement from Pyongyang, said the five nations in dialogue with North Korea were ready for new talks as soon as possible.