

Prayers across Britain as search on for bodies

AFP, London

Prayers were said yesterday at churches across Britain for the dead and the grieving of the London bombings, as the grisly search for bodies and evidence carried on deep underground.

On the day the country was due to remember the end of World War II and the suffering caused by that conflict, Queen Elizabeth was expected to mention the dead and the missing of Thursday's rush-hour attacks.

Home Secretary Charles Clarke said he expected the toll to rise beyond 50 dead, but insisted he was confident police would catch the perpetrators.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, primate of the Church of England, condemned the "spirit of murder and humiliation."

"Today of all days, we need no reminder that the spirit of murder and humiliation is still abroad," he told a nationally televised service at Westminster Abbey attended by the queen.

In his regular Sunday message at the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI told the bombers to "stop in the name of God," calling for prayers for the attackers as well as the victims and their families.

Londoners prayed in St. Pancras Church, steps from the blast that shredded a double-decker bus.

"The people who carried out these attacks are victims of a false religion, be it false Christianity or false Islam," Father Paul Hawkins told the congregation, as police stood guard outside.

As worshippers left the service, they could see a team of forensic experts, placing heel against toe, their eyes glued to the ground for scraps of evidence.

Behind them, a large white tarpaulin hung like a stage curtain, blocking access to Tavistock Square where the Number 30 bus was blown up, killing 13 people.

The country remained jittery since the Thursday morning attacks on London's transport system in which at least 50 people were killed and some 700 wounded. More than

20 people are still missing.

The three train blasts in London occurred within 50 seconds of one another at about 8:50 am (0750 GMT), a level of coordination that bore the hallmarks of an attack by suspected Al-Qaeda operatives, and there have been two claims of responsibility by groups linked to the organisation.

Police evacuated some 20,000 people from Birmingham overnight Saturday in response to a "credible threat" which they said later evaporated.

"I am confident that the perpetrators will be brought to justice in the end," Clarke said.

"I am very optimistic indeed. I think the track record of our security services in bringing people to justice is good. The problem is the time it takes," he told the BBC's News 24 Sunday programme.

He said the toll is "likely to be more than 50" people killed.

Police said on Saturday that they had made no arrests and had yet to focus on any particular suspect.

"Our fear is of course of more

attacks until we succeed in tracking down the gang that committed the atrocities on Thursday," Clarke said. "That is why the number one priority has to be the catching of the perpetrators."

As police continued their painstaking search, a former police chief warned that the bombers were probably British and that there were many in the country willing to take part in such atrocities.

In a column in the News of the World tabloid, Sir John Stevens, the former head of Scotland Yard, said "the terrorists at the center of the London bombing this week will almost certainly be British born and bred, brought up here and totally aware of British life and values."

Stevens said the likely suspects would be "apparently-ordinary British citizens, young men conservatively and cleanly dressed and probably with some higher education."

"They are also willing to kill without mercy -- and to take a long time in their planning. They are painstaking, cautious, clever and very sophisticated."

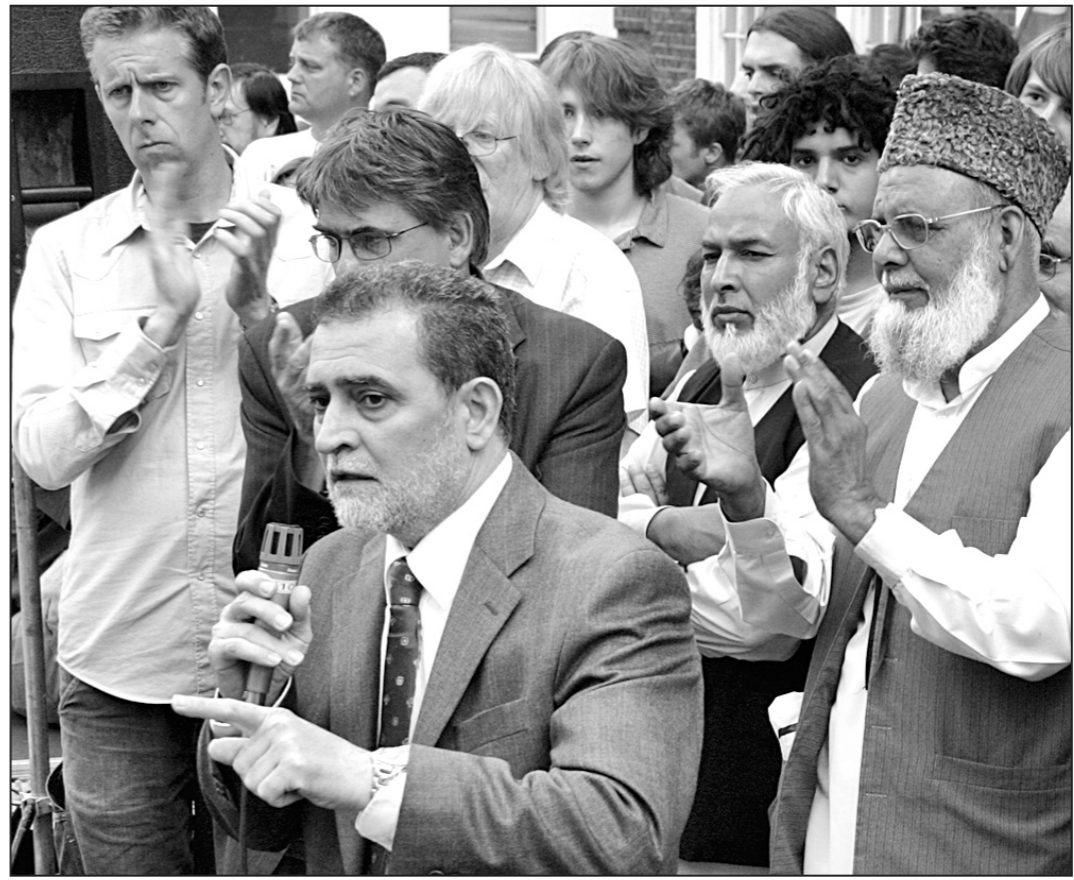


PHOTO: AFP

A man representing the Muslim community in London speaks during a gathering on Saturday to remember the victims of the London bombings that killed at least 50 people and injured some 700. The three bombs placed in packed London Underground trains exploded seconds apart, police said Saturday, revealing a chillingly precise attack by suspected al-Qaeda fanatics.

Japan could be next terror target

AFP, Tokyo

The bomb attacks in London have raised fears that Japan, like Britain a key US ally, may be the next target of terror attacks as it deploys troops in Iraq and hosts the biggest US military base in Asia.

Tokyo has asked railway, bus and airline operators to boost their vigilance since Thursday's bombings, although experts say militants would have a tougher time infiltrating largely homogeneous Japan than multicultural London.

"In Japan, there would be huge casualties if a Shinkansen bullet train, subway line or airport were targeted by terrorists in urban areas," Japan's top-selling daily Yomiuri Shimbun said in an editorial Saturday.

"The government needs to take more effective preventive measures as soon as possible by boosting international sharing of information and reinforcing surveillance systems," the daily said.

In the wake of the bombings on London's transport system that killed at least 50 people and injured some 700, the Tokyo Metro, which is used by 5.69 million passengers a day, said it would increase patrols and remove most remaining dustbins, which could be used as cover for planted bombs.

Mobs torch several govt buildings in Manipur

3 soldiers killed in rebel ambush

REUTERS, AFP, Guwahati

Angry tribesmen set ablaze more than a dozen government buildings after soldiers shot at protesters in volatile Manipur Saturday night, officials said.

"The situation in four districts of the state is tense and more central forces have been rushed there," Manipur's Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh told Reuters by telephone from the state capital Imphal yesterday.

Indian soldiers yesterday were on high alert in the violence-hit northeastern state after security forces fired on protesters when they went on the rampage, torching government buildings.

At least six protesters were injured Saturday when security forces opened fire to quell a strong mob of about 200 people in Ukhrul district, 85km north of Imphal, the state capital.

Sporadic violence continued overnight, Manipur's Additional Police Chief J.C. Dabas told AFP from Imphal.

A police spokesman said tribal Naga protesters in Ukhrul, Senapati and Tamenglong districts launched a coordinated attack burning government offices and damaging property.

"Big mobs have set ablaze at least 20 offices in the three districts and were getting beyond control when security forces fired to disperse the crowd," the spokesman who requested anonymity told AFP by telephone from the state capital Imphal.

The violence is part of a campaign by tribal Naga supporters demanding integration of all Naga-inhabited areas in Manipur into a "Greater Nagaland", a concept sought by a tribal separatist group in adjoining Nagaland state.

Army, police and paramilitary troops were patrolling in armoured vehicles in the four hill districts of Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong and Chandel.

"Our troops are on high alert across the state and we are ready to meet any eventualities," Dabas said. "The situation is still tense but so far under control."

Meanwhile, at least three Indian paramilitary soldiers were killed and two seriously wounded yesterday in an ambush by militants in the north-east state of Manipur a day after a violent protests, officials said.

A police spokesman said heavily armed militants attacked an Assam Rifles patrol near the village of Waitou, about 24km southeast of Manipur's state capital Imphal

around 11:00 am (0530 GMT). "The militants used automatic weapons and fired indiscriminately on the security patrol killing three and seriously injuring two," he said, adding that the wounded were taken to an army hospital.

The Manipur government and state's majority Meitei community are opposed to any move to divide up the region. The NSCN is engaged in peace talks with New Delhi after the two sides entered into a ceasefire in 1997.

The eight-year-old ceasefire agreement between the federal government and NSCN expires on July 31, but is expected to be extended for another year. Manipuri people, who strongly oppose the division of their state, burnt the legislative assembly in 2001 to oppose moves to carve out the Naga-dominated districts.

The Manipur government declared June 18 a local holiday to mark the fourth anniversary of the event, triggering strong protests from Naga tribesmen, who have blocked several roads since June 19.

The protests led to the clash with soldiers that provoked Saturday's arson attacks.

US, UK mull major Iraq pullout next year

REUTERS, London

A leaked document from Britain's Defence Ministry says the British and US governments are planning to reduce their troop levels in Iraq by more than half by mid-2006, the Mail on Sunday reported.

The memo, reported to have been written by Defence Minister John Reid, said Britain would reduce its troop numbers to 3,000 from 8,500 by the middle of next year.

"We have a commitment to hand over to Iraqi control in Al Muthanna and Maysan provinces (two of the four provinces under British control in southern Iraq) in October 2005 and in the other two, Dhi Qar and Basra, in April 2006," the memo was reported to have said.

The memo said Washington planned to cut its forces to 66,000 from about 140,000 by early 2006.

"Emerging US plans assume 14 out of 18 provinces could be handed over to Iraqi control by early 2006," the memo said.

The United States is training Iraqi forces to take over the country's defence in the face of an insurgency involving allies of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and foreign militants allied to al-Qaeda operative Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

But critics say Iraqi troops are not ready to take charge of security in their country.

"There is, however, a debate between the Pentagon/Centcom,

who favour a relatively bold reduction in force numbers and the multinational force in Iraq, whose approach is more cautious," read the memo.

Reid said in a statement in response to the article:

"We have made it absolutely plain we will stay in Iraq for as long as is needed. No decision on the future force posture of UK forces has been taken."

"We have always said it is our intention to hand over the lead in fighting terrorists to Iraqi security forces as their capability increases."

"We therefore continually produce papers outlining possible options and contingencies. This is but one of a number of such papers produced over recent months covering various scenarios. This is prudent planning."

In Washington, a Pentagon spokesman, Lieutenant-Commander Joe Carpenter, said: "I am not aware of any decided upon timeline (for a withdrawal of troops) or that memorandum in particular."

The United States and Britain have the two largest contingents of foreign forces in Iraq and the memo described the impact a reduction of US and British forces might have on other allied troops.

"The Japanese will be reluctant to stay if protection is solely provided by the Iraqis. The Australian position may also be uncertain."

A London blast victim who cheated death twice

AFP, London

Amid the death and destruction of the London bombings, which killed at least 50 people, tales emerged Sunday of a woman who survived two separate blasts as well as of survivors who had narrowly escaped death on previous occasions.

Jodie Ward, a 36-year-old from Putney in south London, related how she emerged safe from two of the bombings inside less than an hour.

The national health service human resources manager survived the blast at Edgware Road that left seven people dead, then jumped on a bus in a bid to get to work on time, only to be caught in the blast which ripped through the number 30 double decker bus at Tavistock Square, killing 13 people.

"There was glass and blood everywhere. I must have a halo around me," Ward, who suffered minor cuts and bruises, told reporters.

With Ward's sister Stacey having survived the tsunami in Sri Lanka six months earlier parents Sheena and John dubbed the pair "The Miracle Sisters."

Design manager Tad Gryglewicz also survived the bus bombing which led to speculation a suicide bomber might have been responsible after some passengers reported seeing a man fiddling suspiciously with a bag.

4 mosques vandalised in New Zealand

AP, AFP, Wellington

Four mosques among six Islamic centres were vandalised in northern New Zealand on Saturday night, leaving windows smashed and walls splashed with graffiti, police said.

Walls of the vandalised mosques were painted with the message "Londoners RIP", police said yesterday following the deadly bombings in London claimed by Muslim militant groups.

In what appeared to be a co-ordinated series of attacks across Auckland, vandals smashed win-

dows and doors and left variations of the same message in black paint on walls facing the street.

Muslim leaders and political leaders condemned the attacks.

New Zealand Federation of Islamic Associations president Javed Khan said it was the first time an attack on this scale had occurred against the country's 40,000 Muslims, about 25,000 of whom live in Auckland.

They declined to say whether the attacks in Auckland were linked to subway and bus bombings in central London Thursday, which killed at least 49 people and injured 700.

'al-Qaeda recruiting in British colleges'

REUTERS, London

al-Qaeda -- chief suspect behind last week's London bomb attacks which killed more than 50 people -- is secretly recruiting Muslims in British colleges, according to the Sunday Times newspaper.

It is especially looking for students with engineering or computer expertise, the paper added, citing what it said was a leaked report from the Home Office and Foreign Office.

It quoted the report as saying: "Extremists are known to target

schools and colleges where young people may be very inquisitive but less challenging and more susceptible to extremist reasoning."

The Iraq war was one of the key causes of young British Muslims turning to terrorism, the report added.

"It seems that a particularly strong cause of disillusionment among Muslims is a perceived 'double standard' in the foreign policy of western governments, in particular Britain and the US," the report was quoted as saying.



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistan Army rescue helicopter drops relief supplies in a flood affected area during relief operations in Qadirabad, some 120km from Lahore. The current number of flood affected villages stands at 664 and caused the loss of standing crops on 147,628 acres, besides dislodging 302,000 persons in 10 different districts of the Punjab province, official media reports said yesterday.

Bishops give battling Arroyo vital boost

REUTERS, Manila

Influential Roman Catholic bishops in the Philippines yesterday rejected calls for Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to step down, handing the embattled president a major reprieve after weeks of turmoil.

"We declare our collective decision that we won't demand her resignation," said Fernando Capalla, outgoing president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), reading from a statement.

The politically powerful Catholic Church, which played a decisive role in the ouster of presidents in 1986 and 2001, said the clergy's role was to provide moral guidance in confusing times and not be "politicians with a blueprint."

"We don't believe in intruding into politics," said the statement by the 91 senior priests.

Defying mounting calls on her to quit over allegations of election fraud, Arroyo said on Friday she had done no wrong and challenged her opponents to pursue an impeachment case.

But the bishops said Arroyo's apology, for "a lapse in judgement" in speaking to an election official while votes were being counted last year, was insufficient. They demanded the creation of an independent commission to look into the allegations of election fraud and corruption in her family.

The bishops also had harsh words for Philippine politicians in general and appealed for them to show stronger moral values.

10 Afghan soldiers beheaded

AP, AFP, Kandahar/ Kabul

Suspected Taliban gunmen ambushed an Afghan government border patrol in the desert near the frontier with Pakistan, killing 10 soldiers and beheading their bodies, a provincial governor said yesterday.

The victims served on a 25-member patrol in southern Helmand province that was attacked late Saturday by militants driving four pickup trucks, said provincial Gov. Sher Mohammed Aghunzada. The remaining 15 soldiers escaped.

"The Taliban cut the heads off all the soldiers who were killed," he said. Aghunzada said the dead soldiers' bodies had been recovered.