

US warns of terror attacks in KSA

REUTERS, Riyadh

The United States warned its citizens in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday that militants were planning fresh attacks in the world's biggest oil exporter and security forces said they had found a militant bomb factory.

"The American embassy in Riyadh advises all American citizens living in Saudi Arabia that it has received indications of operational planning for a terrorist attack or attacks in the kingdom," the US embassy in Riyadh said in a statement.

"The embassy has no specific information concerning timing, target or method of any possible attack(s)."

Hours after the embassy published its warning, Saudi Arabia's Interior Ministry said security forces uncovered a hideout 60 km (40 miles) southeast of Riyadh where militants had stored more than two tonnes of bomb-making equipment.

The cache included fertiliser, ammonium nitrate, aluminium powder, potassium nitrate and other chemicals used by suspected al-Qaeda militants to make bombs deployed in attacks on Western housing compounds and security forces buildings.



PHOTO: AFP

United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) president and Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi raises his fist while exclaiming "long live the Malays!" at the conclusion of his keynote speech during the morning proceedings of the Umno annual general assembly in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

US lawmaker creates firestorm with call to bomb holy Muslim sites

REUTERS, Washington

A US congressman who suggested the United States might consider bombing Muslim holy sites, including Makkah, has drawn apology demands from US Muslim and Arab groups but rejected a request to meet with one leading organisation.

Rep. Tom Tancredo made the comment on July 14 in answer to a radio host's question about a possible response to any hypothetical nuclear terrorist attack on the United States.

"If this happens in the United States and we determine that it is the result of extremist fundamentalist Muslims, you could take out their holy sites," the Colorado Republican said.

"You're talking about bombing Mecca?" the host asked.

"Yeah," Tancredo responded, according to an audio excerpt posted online by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Washington-based group. A spokesman for the congressman confirmed the substance of Tancredo's remarks.

LONDON BOMBINGS

Pakistan quizzes 'UK al-Qaeda chief'

AFP, Islamabad

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was set to meet police and security chiefs yesterday to discuss whether they need extra powers two weeks after the London bombings, while officials in Pakistan were reportedly interrogating a key al-Qaeda suspect about the attacks.

The alleged British al-Qaeda chief was being questioned by police in Pakistan who say he telephoned the four suspect suicide bombers just hours before the attack, a report said.

Britain has been keen to take a proactive stance following its worst terrorist attack, pledging to rush through a raft of tough anti-terror laws.

The government is also considering an international conference on how to snuff out Islamic extremism, with Blair taking a particular aim at Islamic religious schools or madrassas, suspected of spreading

extremist ideology.

The prime minister, however, is keen to find out if more can be done, with the controversial issue of whether evidence from phone-tapping should be allowed in court expected to crop up in Thursday's meeting with security heads.

Security officials in Islamabad said they were holding 228 suspects, but denied media reports that Haroon Rashid Aswat was among the detainees.

For their part, Scotland Yard and the Home Office declined to comment on the latest reports about the investigation into Britain's worst terrorist attack, which ripped through London's subway network and a bus exactly two weeks ago.

The respected Times newspaper, however, reported that the 30-year-old suspected terror mastermind was arrested during one of many raids on Islamic religious schools, known as a madrassas.

"We believe this man had a crucial part to play in what happened in London," it cited a senior Pakistani source as saying.

Responding to the news, Aswat's father, Rashid, who lives in Batley, West Yorkshire -- the same town in north England as one of the presumed London bombers -- said he had lost contact with his son many years ago.

"We are being asked about Haroon Rashid Aswat. He has not lived at this house and we have not had contact with him for many years," he said in a statement, adding that his son had received a normal upbringing and education and at the age of 19 began studying at a local madrasa.

An unnamed brother told the regional Yorkshire Post newspaper that Aswat moved to London 10 years ago and the family had not seen him since.

We are not sure where he went

and can't answer why he has not been staying in touch," he said.

The Times, citing anonymous intelligence sources, said the key suspect was understood to have been posing as a businessmen and using a false name.

He was picked up in a raid at a madrasa at Sargodha, 144km from Islamabad, by Pakistani intelligence officials and flown to a prison in the capital, the daily said in a front page article.

Scotland Yard had been hunting the man since he flew out of Britain after the July 7 attacks on the subway and a bus in London, according to The Times.

Raising suspicions, it claimed that the suspect arrived in Britain a fortnight before the bombings to orchestrate final planning for the attack. He allegedly spoke to the suicide team on his mobile phone a few hours before the four men blew themselves up and killed 52 other people.

US seeks to blunt UNSC expansion

AFP, United Nations

The United States on Wednesday warned against holding a UN vote on Security Council expansion at this time, apparently to blunt momentum toward a compromise deal between Africa and four regional powers seeking permanent membership in the powerful body.

Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns made the rounds at the United Nations to impress on delegates Washington's firm opposition to any vote at this time.

He travelled to the UN as Brazil, Germany, India and Japan were locked in intensive negotiations with an 18-member African Union (AU) team to reconcile their rival draft resolutions on how best to secure permanent council membership for the so-called G4 as well as for two African countries.

"I am here to indicate to the UN secretariat as well as to many of the member countries and regional groupings the strong US support for the UN," he said.

Pointing to rumours of a vote this week or the next on a council expansion draft, Burns said: "We think that's too soon, we think that it's divisive and we would rather see that debate be

extended. It's a very complex debate. It's been under way for 10 years. We can wait for a couple more months."

The G4 has submitted a draft in the 191-member General Assembly that seeks to boost Council membership from 15 to 25, with six new permanent seats without veto power, including two for Africa, and four non-permanent seats.

A rival draft by the 53-member AU calls for a 26-member Security Council, with six new permanent seats with veto power, including two for Africa, and five non-permanent seats, including two for Africa.

"We're open to expansion," Burns said. "But we actually think that we can't put the cart before the horse, that the institution here is badly in need of reform and those reforms should be considered first and a Security Council expansion would be taken later."

He highlighted the need for UN management reform, including the need to improve accountability, integrity and effectiveness in the wake of the oil-for-food fiasco.

He also recalled other US priorities, including creation of a Peace Building Commission for nations emerging from conflict and of a Human Rights Council to replace the existing, largely discredited Human Rights Commission.

"We would like to see in the future perhaps a modest expansion because we worry about a big bang expansion that might undercut and depreciate the effectiveness of the council," Burns said.

Washington favours 20 Security Council members and only two new permanent seats, one for Japan and the other to an unidentified developing nation.

Asked why, in view of the warming US-Indian ties illustrated by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's US visit, Washington was not backing New Delhi's bid, Burns said: "We certainly agree with the general proposition that India's rising role in the world is such that institutions like the United Nations will need to accommodate a greater role for India."

"But we are not yet prepared to make a decision, much less make an announcement about supporting any additional country beyond Japan... And I don't see us changing our position."

At present, only the so-called Big Five permanent members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- have the right of veto within the council, which also has 10 rotating non-permanent members without veto power.

SHARON DEPUTY SAYS

Israel may bring Gaza pullout forward

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's deputy raised the prospect yesterday of bringing forward the start of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza to prevent opponents of the pullout from carrying out threats to disrupt it.

A march on Gaza's settlements by thousands of demonstrators fizzled out on Wednesday night after security forces blocked the way, but Israeli police said they arrested about 300 people trying to slip into the occupied strip overnight.

Settlement evacuation is scheduled to begin in mid-August, but officials are increasingly worried about giving ultranationalists any more time to mount disruptive protests and foment resistance among a hard core of Gaza settlers.

"I definitely weigh positively the possibility of moving up the date set ahead of time," Vice Prime Minister

Ehud Olmert told Israel Radio. "The developments of the past days have signaled a direction in nature of the clashes and protests."

A government source said Sharon, also concerned about a surge of Israeli-Palestinian bloodshed, might discuss possible changes in the pullout timetable with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who begins a visit to the region on Thursday.

Sharon, who has billed his plan as "disengagement" from conflict with the Palestinians, originally planned evacuation of Gaza's 21 settlements to begin on July 22 but delayed it to avoid a Jewish mourning period that starts this weekend.

Any attempt to bring forward the withdrawal would further antagonise religious settlers and their supporters who believe Jews have a biblical birthright to Gaza, where 8,500 Jews live in isolation from 1.3 million Palestinians.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli soldiers prevent Palestinians from leaving their houses during an operation at the Aza refugee camp near the West Bank town of Bethlehem Wednesday.

Susilo orders troops in Aceh to back off

THE JAKARTA POST/ ANN, Jakarta

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has ordered the Indonesian Military (TNI) to stop its offensive against Aceh rebels in a bid to facilitate the signing of peace deal scheduled for Aug. 15 in Jakarta.

The order came after a series of clashes in the province as the Indonesian government and Free Aceh Movement (GAM) separatist negotiators inked a draft peace agreement in Helsinki on Sunday.

At least five rebels, four TNI soldiers and two civilians have been killed since then, according to GAM. The TNI says there have only been two clashes, in which four separatists and one soldier

died and two were wounded.

"The President has asked TNI chief Gen. Endriartono Sutarto not to launch any more offensives against the separatists for the sake of the peace deal," Cabinet Secretary Sudi Silalahi said after a Cabinet meeting on Wednesday.

Minister of Communications and Information Sofyan A. Djalil, one of the government's negotiators, said the President also asked the TNI leadership to disseminate points in the peace deal to soldiers in the field.

"The President made it very clear in the meeting that the TNI must take a defensive posture in case of attacks by GAM fighters. There is a possibility that they (soldiers) will remain in their barracks in the meantime," he said.