

al-Qaeda camps in Pakistan to train operatives: US

AFP, Washington

al-Qaeda is believed to have established compounds inside Pakistan to train small groups of operatives for possible attacks in the West, a US official said Monday.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the compounds had been detected over the past year in a semi-autonomous tribal area along the mountainous border with Afghanistan.

The compounds are "not big ones. These are small," the official told AFP. "They are not like the big camps that they had seen in Afghanistan previously."

But they were being used to train groups of 10 to 20 people at a time for what were believed to be operations in the West, particularly in Western Europe, the official said.

Pakistan on Tuesday dismissed as "absurd" US claims that al-Qaeda has set up new training camps in a remote tribal area, saying that if Washington has any evidence it should share it with Islamabad.

Ethnic group plans new Nepal blockade

AFP, Kathmandu

An ethnic group in southern Nepal whose pro-autonomy protests earlier this year left 29 dead vowed Tuesday to renew a blockade of the capital.

The group in the fertile but impoverished Terai plains bordering India suspended its three-week protests on February 8 in a move it said was aimed at paving the way for talks with the government.

But the government has "failed to create an atmosphere for talks," said Upendra Yadav, chairman of the Madhesi Janaadikar (People's Right) Forum.

The group is demanding the resignation of Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitala over what it calls the police's "excessive behaviour" during the protests, which claimed 29 lives and left hundreds injured.

Pak team in India for peace talks

Sketches of bombing suspects released

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police questioned a Pakistani man about blasts that killed 68 on a cross-border train as a top official arrived from Islamabad yesterday to push ahead peace talks despite the carnage.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri flew into New Delhi airport in the afternoon, a high commission spokesman told AFP, just a day after the firebombing of the "Friendship Express".

"Kasuri is going to hospital to meet the injured people," he added. Ten of 12 badly burnt train passengers are Pakistanis fighting for their lives in New Delhi's Safdarjung hospital.

Unofficial talks were expected in the evening between Indian foreign ministry officials and members of the 17-man Pakistani team before Wednesday's official meeting of the India-Pakistan Joint Commission.

Indian police meanwhile quizzed Karachi resident Usman

Mohammed, who was aboard the train.

"He was in the compartment from where IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) were recovered after the blasts," Haryana state police inspector general Sharad Kumar told a news conference.

"He is being questioned in connection with the explosion on the Samjhauta Express," Kumar said.

The trans-national train service, which began in 1976, has been suspended in the past following terror incidents, most recently between 2002 and 2004, after suspected Pakistan-backed militants attacked India's parliament in December 2001.

But in what commentators in both countries hailed as a new maturity in relations, officials refrained from finger-pointing and re-committed themselves to dialogue.

"Instead of indulging in a blame game, both governments are

cooperating against what is clearly a concerted terror attack against India and Pakistan," India's Asian Age newspaper said.

The Post in Pakistan agreed, saying that "arguably the wisdom has sunk in that on both sides there are spoilers who do not want to see the peace process started in 2004 succeed."

Kasuri said he would not be scared away from talks Wednesday and Thursday with his Indian counterpart, Pranab Mukherjee.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh vowed the culprits would be punished, as India held back from blaming Muslim militants with links to Pakistan -- as it has done for almost every previous terror attack.

Police in India's Haryana state, where the blasts happened, released sketches and descriptions of two men wanted for questioning on suspicion of planting the bombs.

Six people were killed and at least 105 wounded or overcome by fumes when a chlorine gas tanker exploded in the town of Taji, north of Baghdad, security and defence sources said.

Bombs kill 16 Iraqis in Baghdad

9 more GIs slain, 20 bodies found

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

Three car bombs in southern Baghdad killed up to 16 people yesterday while nine more US soldiers died in separate attacks.

Insurgents kept up the volley of attacks despite a major US-backed security crackdown aimed at restoring order to the Iraqi capital.

Police also reported that 20 unidentified bodies were found in Baghdad on Monday, a spike in the daily death toll after a marked reduction since the start of the offensive.

The first car bomb exploded near a fuel station in the district of Saidiya, killing five people and wounding 11 more, police said. Another police source, however, said three were killed and 12 wounded in that attack.

Another car bomb exploded in Doura, in the south of Baghdad, killing five people and wounding 20 at a vegetable market.

Six people were killed and at least 105 wounded or overcome by fumes when a chlorine gas tanker exploded in the town of Taji, north of Baghdad, security and defence sources said.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian Congress Party activists some with their mouths wrapped in black cloth carry banners, flags and placards while taking part in a condolence gathering in Kolkata yesterday following bomb blasts on the "Samjhauta (Friendship Express)".

Abbas seeks European support for unity deal

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas left yesterday on a tour of European capitals in a bid to convince key allies to give a unity government a chance and ease a crippling aid freeze.

Abbas began his whirlwind tour to London, Berlin and Paris on the heels of a disappointing three-way summit with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, which failed to make any significant breakthrough on the moribund peace process.

The United States and Israel are demanding that the new government being set up under a power-sharing deal between Abbas's Fatah faction and the Islamist Hamas movement meet international conditions including recognition of Israel and renunciation of violence.

Hamas is blacklisted as a terrorist outfit by Israel and the West, which have imposed an aid boycott on the Palestinians since it took office early last year.

Syria seeks dialogue with US on all issues

AFP, Damascus

Syria is calling for talks with the United States to cover all areas of contention in the Middle East, a state newspaper said on Tuesday.

"Syria wants to engage in a dialogue with the United States concerning all issues: Palestine, the Golan Heights, Iraq, Lebanon as well as anything else to do with Arab countries," an editorial in the official Ath-Thawra said.

"Syria insists on a serious and profound dialogue on all subjects without exception."

Washington accuses Damascus of backing militants in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. The Golan Heights were captured from Syria by Israel during the 1967 war and subsequently annexed.

"If the United States was serious... it would have asked to discuss all the region's problems with a view to solving them, as all the questions are inter-linked," the paper said.



PHOTO: AFP
Iranian Revolutionary Guards fire a missile from the back of a truck during war games near Qom, 120km south of Tehran yesterday. The Islamic Republic's ideological army is conducting three-day land exercises in 16 provinces amid an escalating international crisis over Iran's nuclear programme.

US contingency plan for 'Iran attack' revealed

2nd US aircraft carrier arrives in ME waters

BBC ONLINE, AFP, Manama

US contingency plans for air strikes on Iran extend beyond nuclear sites and include most of the country's military infrastructure, the BBC has learned.

It is understood that any such attack - if ordered - would target Iranian air bases, naval bases, missile facilities and command-and-control centres.

The US insists it is not planning to attack, and is trying to persuade Tehran to stop uranium enrichment.

The UN has urged Iran to stop the programme or face economic sanctions.

But diplomatic sources have told

the BBC that as a fallback plan, senior officials at Central Command in Florida have already selected their target sets inside Iran.

That list includes Iran's uranium enrichment plant at Natanz. Facilities at Isfahan, Arak and Bushehr are also on the target list, the sources say.

BBC security correspondent Frank Gardner says the trigger for such an attack reportedly includes any confirmation that Iran was developing a nuclear weapon - which it denies.

Alternatively, our correspondent adds, a high-casualty attack on US forces in neighbouring Iraq could also trigger a bombing campaign if it were traced directly back to Tehran.

Long range B2 stealth bombers would drop so-called "bunker-busting" bombs in an effort to penetrate the Natanz site, which is buried some 25m (27 yards) underground.

Meanwhile, a second US aircraft carrier arrived in Middle Eastern waters yesterday as promised by US President George W Bush in January amid an escalating crisis with nearby Iran over its nuclear programme.

The USS John C Stennis and its accompanying strike group joined the USS Dwight D Eisenhower in the Sea of Oman but has not yet entered Gulf waters, the US Fifth Fleet said from its base in Manama.