

Britain on high alert as 7/7 anniversary looms

AFP, London

A senior British detective headed for Australia yesterday to question one of eight suspects held over failed bombings in London and Glasgow, as Britain remained on maximum alert for a new al-Qaeda attack.

A series of alerts have accentuated jitters since the attempted bombings as Britain braces for the anniversary of the July 7, 2005 suicide attacks in London which killed 52.

All suspects so far detained are doctors or medical staff with Middle Eastern links.

According to British press reports, several of the suspects were already on the files of domestic intelligence agency MI5 as "people who knew people" that were under observation.

"It appears that there are some linkages which refer to some of the individuals that have been detained," one source said, adding that this had helped "speed up some of the investigations."

At least six of the suspects are believed to be doctors, including a Jordanian neurosurgeon and an

Iraqi doctor, with one being held in Australia after attempting to leave the country.

A British counter-terrorism officer was set to arrive in Australia today to interrogate Mohammed Haneef, a 27-year-old Indian doctor who was arrested at Brisbane international airport Monday.

It was not immediately clear if Britain would seek his extradition.

Australia's Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty said the next action would become clearer within 48 hours.

Asked if a decision on whether Haneef would face charges, be freed or be extradited to Britain would be made soon, Keelty replied: "By the end of the week, I think, is the timeframe that we would give."

Security has been tightened across Britain since two Mercedes cars packed with gas canisters and nails were found in London's entertainment district on Friday.

The following day a blazing Jeep Cherokee rammed into the front doors of Glasgow airport's main terminal, and hours later the national security level was raised to "critical," meaning another attack is

expected "imminently."

Police say the two attacks were linked and on Wednesday reports emerged that the two men who carried out the Glasgow attack may have been the drivers who abandoned the cars in London.

The first arrests in the investigation were made Saturday after police apprehended the two men driving the fiery jeep in Glasgow, one of whom remains in critical condition in hospital.

The injured man was identified by British television as Khalid Ahmed, while the other Glasgow suspect has been named as Bilal Abdulla, an Iraqi doctor.

On Sunday, a 26-year-old man and a 27-year-old woman, believed to be a Jordanian surgeon named by officials in Amman as Mohammed Jamil Abdelkader Asha, and his wife, were arrested. They are now being questioned in London.

A fifth suspect, a 26-year-old man, was arrested in Liverpool on Saturday night. On Sunday, two other men, aged 25 and 28, were detained outside Glasgow.

Fresh protests in India over docked US aircraft carrier

AFP, Chennai

Fresh protests have been staged in southern India over the visit of a US aircraft carrier, with a prominent Muslim group dismissing efforts by servicemen to take part in community activities.

The Tamil Nadu Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam described the nuclear-powered USS Nimitz as a "threat to mankind" that has been "responsible for the killing of thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians."

"It is a pity that Manmohan Singh, the present PM, has bent so low to barter the safety of the country for friendship with the rogue US state," the leader of the group, M. H. Jawahirullah, said late Tuesday as several thousand supporters staged an anti-US demonstration in Chennai.

The USS Nimitz, one of the world's largest warships and on the way back from the Gulf, is currently anchored two nautical miles (3.7 kilometres) off the coast of Chennai, a city formerly called Madras.

Crew members have been on a goodwill offensive, visiting schools and hospitals, and have been generally getting good press in the local media.

Court throws out Anwar's lawsuit against Mahathir

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A Malaysian judge yesterday threw out a lawsuit filed by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim after the country's retired leader Mahathir Mohamad had called him gay.

Anwar immediately called the court's decision "a gross injustice", with his lawyers saying they would appeal.

He lodged the defamation suit in January last year after Mahathir said he could not allow his former deputy to become prime minister because he was a homosexual.

Mahathir's lawyers in January applied to strike out the suit, filing a 48-page affidavit in which Mahathir accused Anwar of aspiring to become prime minister and using the suit to "rehabilitate himself for high office."

"The plaintiff's action is unsustainable based on background evidence...and the defendant's application (Mahathir) to strike out is therefore allowed with costs," said High Court judge Tengku Maimon Tuan Mat.

Neither Mahathir nor Anwar was present in court but Anwar later

issued a statement in which he said the judge "has chosen to ignore the overwhelming body of legal arguments that I have presented to the court" as to why Mahathir should answer the suit.

"Under the circumstances, I am compelled to say that this decision is utterly devoid of any legal merit," Anwar said.

Anwar's lawyer said the former deputy prime minister would appeal.

"I have informed Anwar Ibrahim of the decision and he is indeed quite upset and he has instructed that we file an appeal as we are dissatisfied with the decision," lawyer Sankara Nair told reporters.

Anwar was heir apparent to

Mahathir until his sacking in 1988 after sodomy and corruption charges that landed him in jail for six years. The sodomy conviction was later overturned but the corruption verdict stands, barring Anwar from standing for public office until April 2008.

"I cannot have a person who is like that in my cabinet who may succeed and become the prime minister. Imagine having a gay prime minister. Nobody would be safe," Mahathir told reporters in September 2005.

The lawsuit said Mahathir's "falsely and maliciously" made comments were widely reported by the media, causing "irreparable damage" to Anwar's reputation.

BRITISH CAR BOMB PLOT Indian suspect's family says he's innocent

AFP, Bangalore

The family of an Indian doctor arrested in connection with a British car bomb plot said yesterday he would be proven innocent and return home with "honour and respect."

The suspect, Mohammed Haneef, 27, was detained in Australia in connection with failed car bombings in London and an attempted attack on Glasgow airport last Friday and Saturday. He was about to fly home to see his infant daughter.

"We are confident that he will be released in a day or two," said Shoaib, 20, his brother. "Australian officials have told us he has only been detained for questioning."

"He is such a good person that no one will be able to find a single negative in any corner of his record or conduct," Shoaib said in an interview at the family's three-bedroom apartment in Bangalore's middle-class Richard Park area.

Haneef's wife Firdous had been distraught since hearing news Tuesday of her husband's detention and moved to her father's house with her week-old baby to avoid visitors, the brother said.

His mother Qurathulain sat in a

bedroom weeping while relatives and reporters crowded the third-floor apartment.

Haneef, who was employed at the Gold Coast Hospital on Australia's eastern Queensland state, was described as an ideal family man who sought to improve himself and help others.

He put his brother and sister, Sumayya, through school and college after their father's death in a road accident and studied on a scholarship at the B.R. Ambedkar Medical College in Bangalore, from where he graduated in 2002.

One faculty member remembered him as a "quiet, sober" student.

"We can't believe he would be involved in something like this," B.S. Ramesh, an assistant professor of surgery, said. "Of course it can't be ruled out totally."

His sister Sumayya said he was "moderately religious." Although he prays five times a day and fasts during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in keeping with Islamic religious tenets, he enjoys Hindi music and movies.

He is "a very humble and good-natured man," said Sumayya. "We have faith in god. My brother will return with honour and respect."

Live Earth set to rock the world July 7

AFP, New York

From New York to the Antarctic, from Shanghai to Rio de Janeiro, the world is getting ready to rock Saturday as organisers of the Live Earth events seek to raise awareness of global warming.

Some 7,000 events in 129 countries including eight giant concerts are being promoted by former US vice president Al Gore as part of his passionate bid to focus attention on the dangers of climate change.

The 24-hour event on July 7 includes music, theater and other shows and will be broadcast live worldwide to get the message across to two billion people about the need for drastic measures to protect the environment, say promoters.

A wave of music is set to ripple round the globe starting in Sydney then fanning out to Tokyo, Shanghai, Johannesburg, Hamburg, London, New York, and Rio.

Some 150 stars including Police, Genesis, Madonna, Bon Jovi, Ai Otsuka, Eason Chan, Mana, Joey Yung, Shakira, Linkin Park, Rip Slyme and Red Hot Chili Peppers will be taking part.



PHOTO: AFP

BBC correspondent Alan Johnston, 45, who was snatched at gunpoint on March 12 in the Gaza Strip, waves to reporters yesterday hours after having been released after more than three month of captivity.

Brown outlines changes in constitution

AFP, London

Prime Minister Gordon Brown proposed sweeping changes to the way Britain is governed Tuesday, including moves towards a written constitution and changing the way it decides on going to war.

Brown, who succeeded Tony Blair last week vowing a "new government with new priorities", made a series of recommendations to rebuild trust in government, increase power to parliament and boost engagement in the democratic process.

"It is my hope that by working together for change in a spirit that takes us beyond parties and beyond partisanship we can agree a new British constitutional settlement that entrusts more power to parliament and to the British people," he said, in his first statement to parliament as prime minister.

Brown spoke of a "route map" to make those in power more accountable and to uphold and enhance the rights and responsibilities of the citizen: his reply to opposition claims that he is a "top-down" centraliser.

Chief among the so-called "royal prerogatives" he wishes to

renounce is the power to declare war without parliamentary consent, although lawmakers were allowed a vote on military action in Iraq in 2003.

"For centuries they (the prime minister and executive) have exercised authority in the name of the monarchy without the people and their elected representatives being consulted," Brown told parliament.

Such authority had "no place in a modern democracy", he said, and by transferring the powers to parliament, it would make a "more open 21st century British democracy which better serves the British people".

"The government will now consult on a resolution to guarantee that on the the grave issue of peace and war it is ultimately this House of Commons which will make the decision," he said.

Brown also proposed greater transparency in the intelligence services, with the creation of a new National Security Council bringing together domestic and overseas security with development and community relations.