

US on alert after 'credible' 9/11 bomb threat

AFP, New York

Heavily armed police were on alert in and around New York City yesterday after US officials warned of a "credible" but unconfirmed bomb threat on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

"There is specific, credible but unconfirmed threat information," the Department of Homeland Security said Thursday, as the White House confirmed President Barack Obama had ordered boosted counterterrorism efforts.

"We have taken, and will continue to take all steps necessary to mitigate any threats that arise," the department added in a statement.

A White House official confirmed that President Barack Obama had "directed the counterterrorism community to redouble its efforts in response to this credible but unconfirmed information."

Federal officials in Washington, speaking on condition of anonymity, said there was a potential terrorism threat involving bomb-laden vehicles

against either the capital or New York.

Few details were given, but one US official told AFP a car bomb was "at the top of what we would be looking for."

Although there was no immediate change to the official national threat level, New York authorities immediately announced sweeping extra measures, including vehicle checkpoints.

The police department "is deploying additional resources... some of which you will notice and some of which you will not," Mayor Michael Bloomberg told reporters.

Extra shift hours would effectively increase by a third the size of patrols around New York, with checks on ferries, tunnels, bridges and landmarks, he said.

US Senator Susan Collins, a ranking member of the homeland security committee, confirmed that she had received a classified briefing on a "specific and credible" terrorist threat Thursday morning.

"I am confident that the administration is taking the threat seriously," she said in a statement.

Earlier, US military bases had raised their alert levels, but officials would not say whether this was related to the new threat report.

The scare came days ahead of Sunday's anniversary ceremonies for the September 11, 2001, attacks, when Obama and his predecessor George W Bush are due in the city, along with large crowds.

Despite frequent threats and a string of failed plots, al-Qaeda has not succeeded in mounting a major attack on US soil since 2001, when it hijacked passenger planes and crashed them into New York's World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a Pennsylvania field, killing nearly 3,000 people.

However, officials have warned of a possible backlash following the US commando operation in May that killed al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden in a secret compound in Pakistan.

According to US officials, documents and computer files were seized at the compound showing bin Laden was considering strikes to coincide with the 9/11 anniversary.



PHOTO: AFP

New York Police Department (NYPD) officers check bags during the morning commute at Grand Central Terminal yesterday in New York City. Security is being tightened in New York and Washington, DC, following the detection of a possible terror threat tied to the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks.

NEWS IN brief

EU slams US failure to close Guantanamo as 'shame'

AFP, Brussels

The EU's home affairs commissioner Cecilia Malmstroem yesterday slammed Washington's failure to close the Guantanamo Bay detention centre as "a shame".

"We are very displeased, this is the opinion of the European Union and of the whole of Europe," she said. "It is a shame that it is still open and that people have not been put on trial," she added.

President Barack Obama signed a decree to close the camp after taking office in January 2009 but the move was blocked by Congress.

US sanctions Venezuelan officials for aiding FARC

AFP, Washington

The United States on Thursday accused four Venezuelan officials, including a general, of aiding the leftist Colombian guerrilla group FARC and put them on a list of narcotics kingpins subject to sanctions.

Venezuela's Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro immediately slammed the action as "abusive."

The four were identified as Major General Cliver Alcalá; ruling party lawmaker Freddy Bernal; Amílcar Figueroa, a delegate to the Latin American Parliament; and intelligence official Ramon Madriz.

Apple wins key German patent case against Samsung

AFP, Duesseldorf

Apple won the latest battle in a global legal war with Samsung yesterday when a German court banned the Korean firm from selling a tablet computer in Germany, ruling it had copied the iPad.

The court, in the western city of Duesseldorf, said Samsung's Galaxy Tab 10.1 computer, a rival to Apple's iconic iPad, had infringed key patent laws.

However, it limited the sales ban to Germany, despite ruling in a previous judgement that the ban should be Europe-wide.

Iraq's anti-graft chief resigns

AFP, Baghdad

The chief of Iraq's anti-corruption watchdog has resigned, citing political interference in the performance of his duties, a spokesman said yesterday.

"Rahim Hassan al-Uqailee, the head of the Integrity Commission, submitted his resignation to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, due to pressure from political parties," an Integrity Commission spokesman told on condition of anonymity.

FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

China blasts West's 'double standards'

AFP, Beijing

China's state media yesterday accused Western countries of "double standards" in their fight against terrorism, ahead of the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

The comment piece by the official Xinhua news agency blamed Washington in particular for turning a "blind eye" to the damage caused by extremists in Russia's Chechnya and in China's own far-western region of Xinjiang.

Nearly 10 years after 9/11, Xinhua said the fight against terror was "far from over", with terrorists changing tactics and increasing "collaboration with separatists and religious extremists".

Xinhua pointed to the United States' refusal in 2009 to extradite back to China members of its mainly Muslim Uighur minority held at US military prison camp Guantanamo Bay -- who were cleared of wrongdoing -- as an example of double standards.

The United States refused to repatriate the Uighurs on the basis they would face almost certain persecution.

Xinhua also accused Western countries of using counter-terrorism as a "cheap excuse" to intervene in other nations' internal affairs.

Foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin, meanwhile, told reporters yesterday that terrorism "has not been eliminated and severe challenges still exist".

Iran vows retaliation over threat

AFP, United Nations

Iran Thursday vowed it would "not hesitate" to hit back following a foreign strike on its soil in a formal complaint to the United Nations over a warning from French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Sarkozy said last week that Iran's "military, nuclear and ballistic ambitions constitute a growing threat that may lead to a preventive attack against Iranian sites that would provoke a major crisis that France wants to avoid at all costs."

Iran's UN ambassador said in a letter to UN leaders that his country would "not hesitate to act in self-defense to respond to any attack against the Iranian nation."

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon yesterday said Palestinian statehood was "long overdue."

"The two state vision where Israel and Palestinians can live... side by side in peace and security -- that is a still a valid vision and I fully support it," he told reporters in Canberra.

"And I support also the statehood of Palestinians; an independent, sovereign state of Palestine. It has been long overdue."

"It is not by the Secretary General so I leave it to the member states to decide to recognise or not to recognise."

Ban, who has been in Australia as part of a sweeping Pacific tour which has taken him to New Zealand, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, called for "meaningful negotiations" to resolve the issue.

The United Nations leader's comments came after Palestinians Thursday launched their campaign to join the UN.

However, Washington has already confirmed it would veto any bid, a move also opposed by Israel.

If the bid is vetoed in the Security Council, the Palestinians plan to turn to the General Assembly where they are expected to easily win the votes needed to upgrade their representation from observer body to non-member state.

Major power outage in US, Mexico

AFP, Los Angeles

A massive power outage triggered traffic gridlock and left at least 1.4 million customers without electricity overnight into Friday in southern California, Arizona and Mexico, officials said.

Amid sweltering temperatures, a number of people had to be rescued from stuck elevators and theme park rides, reports said, while two units at a nuclear power plant tripped offline, as designed.

However, power companies in Southern California restored electricity to most customers by early Friday.

There was no suggestion that terrorism caused the outage, which comes amid jitters ahead of the 10th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington.

Battle for Libya not over yet: NTC

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's de facto premier Mahmud Jibril warned in his first address in Tripoli that the hardest battles still lay ahead as fighters loyal to the new rulers closed in on Moamer Kadhafi's hometown Friday.

World police body Interpol called for the fugitive Gaddafi's arrest for alleged crimes against humanity, following a request by the International Criminal Court.

"The battle of liberation is not finished," Jibril said late Thursday after National Transitional Council troops inching towards Bani Walid southeast of Tripoli came under rocket fire from old regime loyalists inside the oasis town.

The NTC has set a Saturday deadline for towns still loyal to Gaddafi to surrender, but Jibril warned that its troops would return to the offensive sooner if attacks on them continued.

"We have the right to defend ourselves even before the deadline," he said.

NTC fighters celebrated Thursday after they captured the Red Valley, 60 kilometres (40 miles) east of Sirte, one of the main lines of defence for Gaddafi's troops in Sirte, an AFP correspondent reported.

The fighters killed at least 18 Gaddafi troops there, and sporadic fighting continued on Friday morning, the correspondent reported.

NTC fighters were making house-to-house searches for snipers, the reporter said.

The NTC forces were now discussing plans to capture Harawa, the next town on the road to Sirte, Gaddafi's hometown.

In a defiant message on Thursday -- his first for several days -- Gaddafi dismissed as lies reports that he had fled to neighbouring Niger, insisting he was still in Libya.

Jibril, who refused to speculate on Gaddafi's whereabouts, admitted that the battle for Libya's liberation would end only with the "capture or elimination of Gaddafi."

The NTC fears Gaddafi will try to slip across one of Libya's porous borders, and Niger strongly denied he was there after a convoy carrying other senior ousted regime officials arrived on Monday.

PALESTINIAN STATE BID

US confirms use of veto power

AFP, Washington

The United States said Thursday it will veto a bid for UN recognition of a Palestinian state if it comes to a vote before the UN Security Council.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said US opposition to such a move by the Palestinians "should not come as a shock."

"So yes, if something comes to a vote in the UN security council, the US will veto," she said.

In Ramallah, the Palestinian leadership confirmed on Thursday that it intends to make a formal statehood bid at UN despite US opposition.

Turkey vows to protect Gaza aid convoys

Israel says declaration 'grave'

AFP, Dubai

Turkish warships will escort the country's aid vessels bound for the Gaza Strip, protecting them from Israeli ships, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said late Thursday prompting a grave response from Israel.

"Turkish warships will be tasked with protecting the Turkish boats bringing humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip," Erdogan told Al Jazeera television.

"From now on, we will no longer allow these boats to be the targets of attacks by Israel, like the one on the Freedom flotilla, because then Israel will have to deal with an appropriate response," he warned.

Israeli troops killed nine Turkish nationals on the ship Mavi Marmara in the ensuing confrontation, sparking a diplomatic row between the two countries that has strained relations to breaking point.

"Turkey will be firm on its right to control the territorial waters in the east of the Mediterranean," Erdogan added.

Israeli Intelligence Minister Dan Meridor yesterday described Erdogan's comment as "grave and serious" threat.

"These remarks are grave and serious, but we have no wish to add to the polemic," Meridor said on army radio.

"It is better to stay quiet and wait -- we have no interest in aggravating the situation by replying to such attacks," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of Egyptian protesters wave national flags and shout slogans at Cairo's iconic Tahrir Square during a mass rally yesterday calling for reforms as the ruling military warned it would respond harshly to any violence by activists.

Some within AL govt let it go on

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According to another leaked diplomatic cable sent to Washington in 2005, the US embassy in Dhaka expressed concern over the rise in extra-judicial killings.

The cable said Rab, formed in June 2004 with approximately 70 percent military and 30 percent police personnel, started reporting deaths of people in "crossfire" in its custody from the first month of its inception.

The US embassy wrote that with almost no variation, the explanatory press statement from Rab asserted that "a detained suspect died in an ensuing exchange of gunfire after the suspect led Rab to an area containing an arms cache or the hideout of comrades." Regular police units and two smaller police units -- the Cheeta and the Cobra -- began reporting similar incidents.

"Although Rab accounts for fewer than half the crossfire, it retains pre-eminent popular support for spearheading what is seen as an effective strategy against lawlessness. Based on October-January figures, Bangladesh's 2005 crossfire tally could exceed 500," the embassy mentioned.

The cable said from the outset of Rab's rampage, senior ministers had made little effort to conceal their satisfaction with crossfire.

Even the then law minister Moudud Ahmed, the government's legal adviser, stressed to "us that the victims are all terrorists and criminals, and that Bangladeshis welcome Rab's actions," read the dispatch.

The cable said the then state minister for home and Rab boss Lutfozzaman Babar told a US embassy official, "Let us not discuss it. The people are happy and even the judges are happy about it."

The cable said: "Babar said that he gets hundreds of calls from people blessing him after each crossfire and judges encourage him to continue the good work."

The state minister justified Rab as a short-term tactic until law enforcement agencies were streamlined and went through a long-term reform, the cable said.

The dispatch sent to Washington in 2005 said Rab is perceived as making a real dent against crime. Politically, Rab was easily the BNP-led government's most popular initiative in its three years in office.

"There seems little doubt that crossfire killings are sanctioned and directed by the government. Crossfire existed before Rab, but it was only with Rab's debut, in June 2004, that the numbers jumped and spread to the rest of the police," the cable said.

"At this point, however, it appears that a BNP or AL affiliation of a crossfire victim is largely coincidental and reflects only the pervasive criminality of Bangladeshi politics."

It is interesting, though, that few if any of Rab's crossfire victims include people linked to Jamaat-e-Islami or its violent student front, the cable said.

"Rab could become more politicised since its creators and bosses are Home Minister of State Babar, a BNP MP with alleged Islamist sympathies, and Home Secretary Omar Farooq, who has long-standing Jamaat Islami associations," the embassy commented in the dispatch in 2005.

"As the run-up to the general election expected in early 2007 becomes more confrontational and the BNP pulls out all the stops to win another term, it is easy to imagine Rab playing a more partisan, and covert, political role," said the embassy.