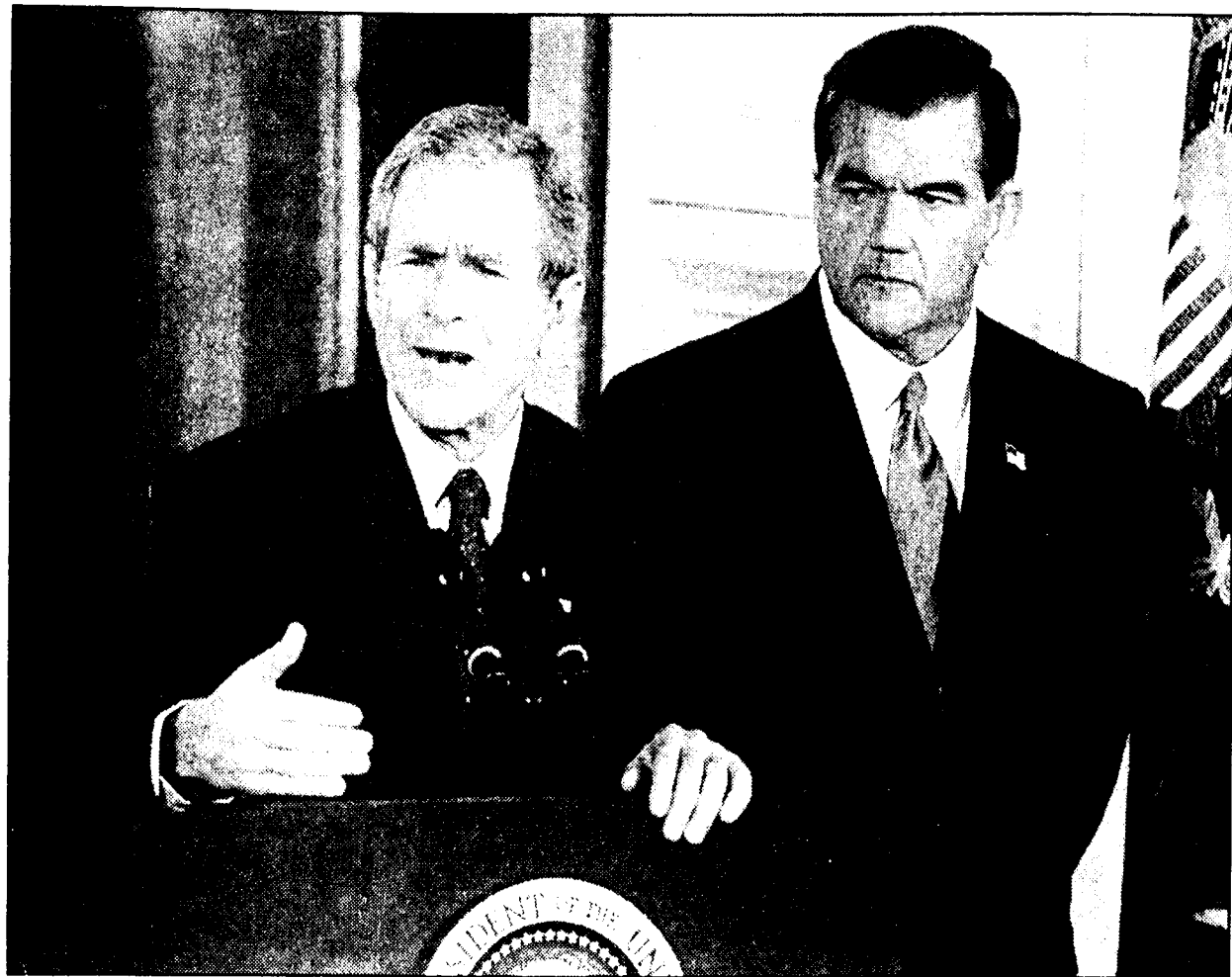


Bush rejects Taliban offer to negotiate; FBI confirms terrorist-anthrax link



CHUCK KENNEDY/KRT PHOTO

President George W. Bush and director of the newly-created Office of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge.

by Ron Hutcheson

Knight-Ridder Newspapers

Federal investigators looked for links Sunday between the recent anthrax scares in New York, Florida and Nevada and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, as President Bush emphatically rejected an offer to negotiate made by Afghanistan's Taliban regime.

In Boca Raton, Fla., the FBI on Sunday confirmed the first clear link between the hijacking suspects and American Media Inc., the tabloid company and one of its publications hit by an anthrax attack. The Sun editor's wife, who works for a real estate firm, rented a Delray Beach apartment this summer to two hijackers killed in the Sept. 11 suicide missions.

The Sun employed photo editor Bob Stevens, who died earlier this month from inhalation of anthrax. Two other AMI employees were exposed, and five more are being re-tested to confirm positive blood test results.

In New York, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said a police officer and two lab technicians who had helped investigate an anthrax case at NBC were being treated for exposure to the bacteria. The three unidentified patients did not develop symptoms and are expected to be fine.

That brought the number of people confirmed to have come in contact with anthrax to 12 in the United States since Sept. 11.

In Nevada, officials said they do not expect anyone there to develop the disease. "We are very optimistic that we will see no human cases of anthrax from this incident," said Barbara Hunt of the Washoe County district health office in Nevada.

Attorney General John Ashcroft said he has "real suspicion" - but no hard evidence - that the anthrax cases are tied to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. He also said that federal investigators are looking for nearly 200 people with possible ties to the Sept. 11 attacks.

Meanwhile, U.S. warplanes continued to pound targets in Afghanistan Sunday, as bombing raids against the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's terrorist network entered the second week.

Returning to the White House after a weekend at the Camp David presidential retreat, Bush bristled with anger when asked about reports that the Taliban was willing to negotiate the fate of bin Laden. Deputy Prime Minister Haji Abdul Kabir said the Taliban would consider sending bin Laden to a neutral third country to stand trial if the United States would end air strikes in Afghanistan.

"There's nothing to negotiate about," Bush said. "They're harboring a terrorist, and they need to turn

him over."

For the first time, he described Christian relief workers being held in Afghanistan as "hostages." Eight aid workers, including two Americans, are awaiting trial in Kabul on charges of preaching Christianity, a crime punishable by death in Afghanistan.

Bush said the Taliban should turn over bin Laden and his followers in al Qaeda, destroy terrorist camps in Afghanistan and "release the hostages they hold," he said.

As for bin Laden, Bush said, "There's no need to discuss innocence or guilt. We know he's guilty."

The outbreaks of anthrax sent jitters around the globe, leading to a rash of false alarms.

In England, several hundred people evacuated Canterbury Cathedral after a worker reported seeing a man drop white powder. In Brazil, authorities detained a Lufthansa airplane after a cleaning crew found a white powder under a passenger seat.

Federal officials expressed fears that the false alarms would divert attention from real cases. Ashcroft warned that the federal government would prosecute anyone who attempts exploit anthrax fears.

U.S. officials from Bush on down sought to calm the nation while urging continued vigilance.

In earlier videotaped remarks to the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Bush offered assurances that the country will emerge from what he called "one of the darkest moments in our history" with a victory over terrorism.

"Let me be clear about this: We will win the war on terrorism," Bush told the doctors.

In Afghanistan, air strikes cut off electricity in Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold, according to reports from Pakistan.

Taliban spokesman Sohail Shaheen acknowledged that eight straight days of bombing raids and missile attacks had taken a toll, but he added, "The real war starts when ground troops enter Afghanistan."

In marked contrast to the talk of negotiation from other Taliban leaders, Shaheen said the regime would never surrender bin Laden. He told ABC that U.S. air strikes had killed at least 400 civilians.

"It is better to be destroyed than to surrender to might and arrogance," he said.

U.S. officials remained focused on the threat of more terrorist attacks and the baffling outbreaks of anthrax in Florida, New York and Nevada.

"There's no question that it's bioterrorism," Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson told CNN. "Whether or not it's connected to al Qaeda, we can't say conclusively."

In Boca Raton, Sun editor Michael Irish's wife Gloria rented unit 1504 at the Delray Racquet Club to Marwan Alshehhi and Saeed Alghamdi this summer, said FBI spokeswoman Judy Orihuela.

Alshehhi was aboard United Flight 175, the second jet to strike the World Trade Center. Alghamdi was on United Flight 93, which crashed 80 miles southeast of Pittsburgh when passengers thwarted an attempt to target another building.

"There is now a link between the editor's wife and the terrorists," Orihuela said. But just as quickly, she said the FBI wasn't drawing immediate conclusions.

"Right now it looks like a coincidence," Orihuela said from outside the tabloid's Boca Raton headquarters. "We are not searching the apartment at this time. We are focusing on this building."

Only one other person besides photo editor Stevens has developed the disease - Erin O'Connor, an assistant to NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw. O'Connor is expected to recover after being exposed through a cut on her hand.

The third anthrax incident occurred in Nevada, where investigators traced the bacteria to a letter that was sent from Malaysia to a Microsoft subsidiary's office.

Ashcroft speculated that terrorists may have targeted news organizations for anthrax attacks as part of an effort to undermine one of the hallmarks of American democracy.

"If people hate freedom, they ought to hate information that allows free people to make good decisions," he said on CBS. "If I were a terrorist, I would want to engender fear that was irrational, and I would want to curtail the availability of information in a free press."

Ashcroft said federal authorities were still looking for nearly 200 people who may have been involved "in one way or another" with the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

"I don't want to be more specific about how they might have been involved. That's one of the things we're trying to ascertain," he said.

Ashcroft said it is "very unlikely" that authorities have captured all of the terrorists who were involved in the Sept. 11 attacks or others who had been planning separate attacks.

"We are doing everything possible to disrupt, to interrupt, to prevent, to destabilize any additional activity," he told NBC.

The attorney general said he could not confirm a report by Knight Ridder Newspapers that terrorists had gathered information for possible terrorist attacks against Walt Disney World in Florida.

From the Koran to foreign policy, students struggle to understand

by John Chadwick

The Record (Bergen County, N.J.)

Weeks after the terror of Sept. 11, some teachers and students at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, N.J. removed their shoes, listened to readings from the Muslim holy book, and tried to answer the question: "Where do we go from here?"

But even the Muslims who organized the forum expressed disagreement and uncertainty as they struggled to cope with and comprehend the horrifying attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11.

The discussion, which attracted about 50 people to the student union on the Teaneck-Hackensack (New Jersey) campus, started with a reading from the Koran that said God created different nations so man would have to learn to get along.

A short time later, one Muslim said the United States could help that learning process by reevaluating its foreign policy.

"If we really want to go forward and create this feeling of unity, do we really understand our foreign policy and what we are doing to the rest of the world?" said Nadeem Siddiqi, a Hackensack, N.J. resident who said his wife attends the university.

Siddiqi said America's backing of repressive regimes, its handling of the Israel-Arab conflict, and the

sanctions imposed against Iraq help sustain desperate conditions that fuel terrorism.

"Do we really expect the next generation of Iraqis to grow up loving America?" Siddiqi said.

The university's Muslim chaplain, however, said blaming the attacks on America's foreign policy trivializes terrorism, which he called a criminal act.

Khalil Ali tried to draw a parallel to the murder of James Byrd, a black man killed in 1998 when three white men dragged him from the back of a pickup truck in Texas.

"People said he was killed because he was black, which subtly placed blame upon him," Ali said. "He was killed because the men who killed him were violent criminals. I don't think the world was attacked Sept. 11 because of foreign policy."

Still, Leonard Grob, a philosophy teacher who also lectures on the Holocaust, said it was important to "get behind the criminality" of the terror attacks and understand that many nations view the world in strikingly different terms from the way many American view it.

"I do see this as a heinous criminal act, and justice must be served," Grob said afterward. "But I think we can't stop there. We have to ask what's behind the act and understand some of the reasons why America is so hated."

With its large number of international students, and its location in Teaneck amid a thriving Indo-Pakistani community, Fairleigh Dickinson has hundreds

of Muslim students, according to students and faculty members.

The audience seemed split between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Some Muslims disagreed over the steps they should be taking to educate the public about their religion.

The suspected hijackers had Arabic names and are believed to have carried out their murderous mission for an Islamic extremist group linked to Osama bin Laden.

Umami Nur Ali, a guest speaker, said Muslims shouldn't try to teach the public about Islam during the current, highly charged atmosphere surrounding the attacks. She said such efforts compromise the complexity of Islam.

"It's a time for the religious communities to come together, but it's not a time to teach Islam," she said.

Others disagreed.

Senior Islam Farghaly said many Americans know almost nothing about Islam, including its reverence for the prophets of Judaism and Christianity.

One faculty member said Muslims must show that the terrorists misused Islam, just as others throughout history have misused religion to justify atrocities.

"The Muslims must say this is a distortion, just like Christians must say the Salem witch trials were a distortion," said Gilbert Steiner, director of the School of Computer Science and Information Systems.

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