

THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM

Bin Laden vows more attacks

■ Terror leader offers vague truce to United States

■ No specific, credible threats, U.S. officials say

By LEE KEATH
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CAIRO, Egypt

His voice was soft, as it was in previous recordings. His tone was flatter than in the past and had an echo, as if recorded indoors.

But there was no mistaking Osama bin Laden's message as he broke more than a year's silence.

The al-Qaida leader, who is believed to be hiding in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, warned in an audiotape aired Thursday that his fighters are preparing new attacks in the United States.

But he offered the American people a long-term truce, though without specifying the conditions.

The tape, portions of which were aired on Al-Jazeera television, came only days after a U.S. airstrike in Pakistan that targeted bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and reportedly killed four leading al-Qaida figures, possibly including al-Zawahiri's son-in-law.

There was no mention of that attack in the tape, which Al-Jazeera said was recorded this month. The network initially reported it believed the tape was made in December but later corrected itself on the air. Editors at the station said they could not comment on how they knew when it was made.

The CIA has authenticated the voice on the tape as that of bin Laden, an agency official said.

Beyond confirming that bin Laden remains alive, the tape could be aimed at projecting an image of strength to al-Qaida sympathizers and portray the group as still capable of launching attacks despite blows against it, analysts said.

The White House rejected the truce offer.

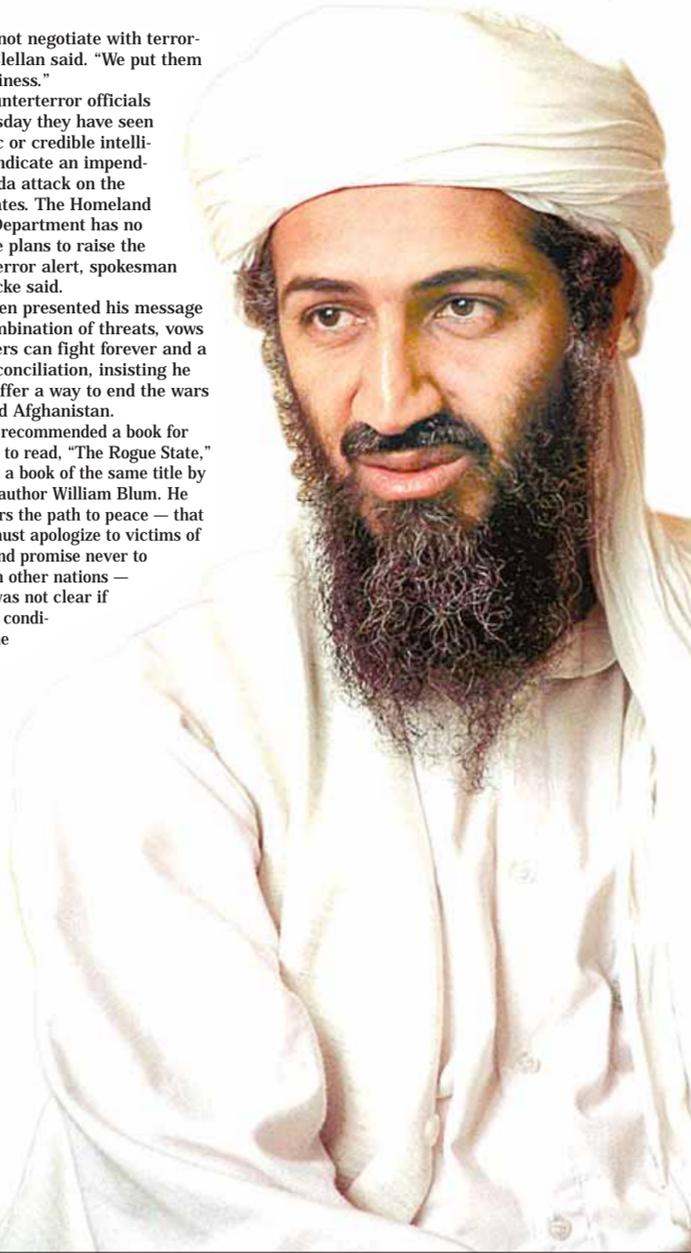
The United States will not let up in the war on terror despite bin Laden's latest threats, White House press secretary Scott McClellan said.

"We do not negotiate with terrorists," McClellan said. "We put them out of business."

U.S. counterterrorism officials said Thursday they have seen no specific or credible intelligence to indicate an impending al-Qaida attack on the United States. The Homeland Security Department has no immediate plans to raise the national terror alert, spokesman Russ Knocke said.

Bin Laden presented his message with a combination of threats, vows his followers can fight forever and a tone of reconciliation, insisting he wants to offer a way to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He even recommended a book for Americans to read, "The Rogue State," apparently a book of the same title by American author William Blum. He said it offers the path to peace — that America must apologize to victims of the wars and promise never to interfere in other nations — though it was not clear if these were conditions for the truce.



AP PHOTOS

In an audio message broadcast on Arab network Al-Jazeera, terror leader Osama bin Laden says his organization is planning a major attack inside the United States.

Shiite leader: Government won't end insurgency

Sunni Arab participation in a new government will not be enough to persuade Islamic extremists and Saddam Hussein loyalists to abandon the insurgency, the country's most powerful Shiite politician said Thursday.

Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, a cleric with close ties to Iran and head of Iraq's largest Shiite party, also said the Americans must address mistakes in the battle against Sunni-led insurgents and allow the Iraqis a bigger role in the fight.

The cleric made his comments during an interview in his heavily guarded residence along the Tigris River as the election commission was preparing to announce results of the Dec. 15 national ballot. An alliance of Shiite religious parties, in which al-Hakim's group plays the leading role, is expected to claim the biggest number of seats in the new parliament but not enough to rule without Sunni and Kurdish partners.

U.S. officials hope the new leadership will win the trust of the Sunnis and defuse the insurgency so that American and other international troops can begin to go home.

"We are convinced of the necessity that the Sunnis should participate along with us in the government because they are an important component in Iraq," he said. "As for who is going to join the government with us, this matter is related to who is closer to us regarding the principles we believe in."

Calls intensify for release of American journalist

As a deadline neared for hostage American journalist Jill Carroll, Muslim leaders and her pleading mother appealed Thursday to kidnappers to spare her life and set her free.

Referring to demands from Carroll's abductors that Iraqi women be released from U.S. custody, a senior Iraqi official said six jailed Iraqi women were due to be freed by the U.S. military.

But the White House said no prisoner release appeared imminent, and a major Sunni Arab clerical group said it could do little to help because it did not know who was holding the 28-year-old reporter.

The kidnappers, identified as the previously unknown "Revenge Brigade," have set a deadline of tonight for all Iraqi female detainees to be freed or they will kill Carroll. However, Iraqi kidnappers have often given such ultimatums only to ignore them and continue holding captives.

New images showing Carroll surrounded by three armed and masked gunmen were aired Thursday by Al-Jazeera television. The 20 seconds of silent footage were from the same tape as excerpts broadcast Tuesday announcing the 72-hour deadline.

Pakistani officials say al-Qaida operatives among those killed in American airstrike

By MUNIR AHMAD
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan

An al-Qaida explosives and chemical weapons expert and a relative of the terror network's No. 2 leader were among four top operatives believed killed in a U.S. missile strike in Pakistan last week, Pakistani security officials said Thursday, as authorities arrested five more militant suspects.

Pakistani authorities have said four or five foreign militants were killed in the Jan. 13 attack in Damadola, a village near the Afghan border. Officials say the airstrike targeted but missed al-Qaida No. 2 leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. It also killed at least 13 residents, outraging many in the Islamic country.

The security officials, all speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not

authorized to speak to media, named four al-Qaida figures thought to have been in the village at the time of the attack, saying that their bodies were believed to have been taken away by sympathizers.

They included Midhat Mursi al-Sayid Umar, 52, an Egyptian cited by the Justice Department as an explosives expert and poison instructor who trained hundreds of mujahedeen at a terrorist camp in Afghanistan near the eastern city of Jalalabad before the ouster of hard-line Taliban regime in late 2001.

The department's Web site says that the exact whereabouts of Umar, also known as Abu Khabab al-Masri, are unknown but that he may be residing in Pakistan, and offers \$5 million for information leading to his arrest. It says that since 1999, Umar has distributed training manuals with recipes for crude chemical and biological weapons.



Supporters of Pakistani religious party Jamat-i-Islami protest U.S. bombings of suspected terrorists in Pakistani tribal territory of Bajour. The strike killed 17 people, several reported to be al-Qaida operatives.

Dozen killed in Baghdad attacks

Twin bombings strike busy downtown area

By SAMEER N. YACOB
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

Two near-simultaneous bombings targeted a crowded downtown Baghdad coffee shop and a nearby restaurant Thursday, killing more than a dozen people. The attacks came as a foreign assessment team reported evidence of fraud in the Dec. 15 elections but did not endorse calls for a rerun.

The bombings occurred despite government moves to heighten security as the election commission prepares to announce the election results. The announcement, which could come today, sets the stage for talks on a new national unity government. U.S. officials hope will help calm the insurgency and enable the United States to begin withdrawing its 140,000 troops.

The first explosion occurred at a coffee shop on bustling Saadoun Street in the heart of Baghdad. Seconds later, a blast caused by a planted bomb rocked a restaurant just down the street.

Some officials said the first blast was triggered by a suicide attacker wearing an explosive vest, while others insisted both were caused by bombs detonated by remote control.

Officials variously reported the death toll between 13 and 25. Police Lt. Osama Mohammed blamed the confusion on miscounting of bodies because the blast sites were so close.

The explosions shattered shop windows and destroyed several cars. Wooden tables and chairs were strewn over the bloodstained pavement as rescue workers treated the wounded. Two men sobbed beside the bodies of two men covered with bloodstained blankets outside the coffee shop.

The blasts were part of a surge in violence in Iraq this week. U.S. and Iraqi officials have predicted a spike in attacks when the election figures are released.

Maj. Gen. Mahdi Sabih Hashim said Thursday that heightened security would be in effect nationwide in the coming days. He gave no details but said authorities intend to go after terrorists deep in their hideouts.

Italy to pull out of Iraq by end of year

ROME — Italy will withdraw all its troops from Iraq by the end of this year, the defense minister said Thursday in the first official timetable for Rome to end its mission.

Defense Minister Antonio Martino said in an address to a parliamentary committee that the mission "will be considered concluded at the end of the year having definitively completed its mission."

Italy has 2,600 troops based in southern Iraq. The country's military mission will be phased out gradually during the year and a civilian force will replace it, Martino said.

The withdrawal was being made in agreement with allies and according to a timetable that allows for Iraq's reconstruction, Martino said.

White House press secretary Scott McClellan said the Bush administration was aware of the steps that Italy is taking.

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