

Threats put nation on edge, but fear doesn't conquer all

By Rick Hampson and Martha T. Moore, USA TODAY

This weekend, the war on terrorism is a war of nerves.



National Guardsmen stand in New York's Grand Central Station Thursday as the U.S. increased defenses against a possible attack.

By Peter Morgan, Reuters

It's a weekend for sealing windows with plastic and duct tape, for wondering whether the briefcase across the aisle holds a bomb, for sitting down with the family to plan for the unplannable.

It's a weekend when some Americans will relax by the pool or go ice fishing, while others will ready their home safe rooms, install a wood stove or stock up on ready-to-eat meals.

It's a weekend when police will look for men with facial nicks that might indicate a freshly shaved Islamic beard.

A confluence of potential plagues — war abroad, terrorism at home, schism among allies — has a nation that thought it was recovering from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on edge once again.

Hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, is over. The United Nations Security Council is moving toward a final decision on Iraq. And everyone is waiting for the response to Osama bin Laden's latest call for suicide attacks on America.

"This is a major ramping up of anxiety, probably the worst since 9/11," says **Jennifer Lerner**, an assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon University who has studied anxiety in the United States since Sept. 11, 2001.

The nation today finishes its first week on "orange alert," the second highest security designation. The alert level was raised from yellow based on vague but allegedly compelling evidence of the most dangerous terrorist threat since 9/11.

Homeland Security officials urged people to stock up on essentials, fashion a refuge in their homes from chemical, biological or radioactive weapons and make a family emergency plan.

In the past week, shock has followed shock.

Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge rated the threat of an attack as 8 on a scale of 10. Bin Laden called, via audio tape, for more suicide bombings and seemed to imply he planned to become a martyr himself in the coming year. Secretary of State Colin Powell warned that the NATO alliance "is breaking itself up." Intelligence officials said North Korea had an untested ballistic missile capable of reaching the western United States.

A major New York City bridge was closed for more than an hour because of a suspicious truck with mismatched plates. Machine gun-toting cops patrolled outside a booth that sells discount theater tickets in midtown Manhattan. An anti-aircraft battery was erected in front of the Washington Monument. The government warned critical industries to check for infiltrators among employees.

Rep. Jane Harman of California, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, told her daughter, a student at New York University, to stay out of the city's subways — although the stations are flooded with officers and police dogs.

Hundreds of weekend anti-war demonstrations were planned in Europe and the United States, including New York City and San Francisco. London organizers promised the largest anti-war rally in British history.

Many Americans reported canceling plans to travel overseas. On Thursday, a major terminal at London Gatwick Airport was closed temporarily after police arrested an arriving passenger who had a grenade in his luggage that appeared to be live. Across town, hundreds of troops patrolled Heathrow, Europe's busiest airport.

'Moment of truth'

The jitters — and the precautions — anticipate what Powell calls the "moment of truth" on war with Iraq. Friday, chief U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix reports to the Security Council, which may decide soon whether to back the United States' determination to invade if Saddam Hussein does not cooperate with inspectors.

For many Americans, the realities of the war on terrorism are sinking in:

- **It won't end anytime soon.** "Even if we got Osama bin Laden and hung him from the Brooklyn Bridge, I don't see any obvious end to this," says Roy Licklider, a Rutgers University expert on political terrorism.

It's clearer that the war on terrorism is a two-way street. If the United States can hunt down terrorists, terrorists can wage psychological war on Americans, many of whom are too young to recall the grimmest days of the U.S.-U.S.S.R nuclear standoff.

"People are beginning to realize that the perpetual cloud we had in the Cold War has been replaced by another perpetual cloud," says Robert Thompson, a Syracuse University professor who studies American culture. "Sometimes the sun shines through, but the cloud isn't going away."

- **Americans continue to say they expect to become victims of terrorism, although few act that way.**

Lerner, the Carnegie Mellon psychologist, asked a national sample of Americans to rate, on a scale of 1 to 100, the risk of being hurt in a terrorist attack. Half rated the threat at 20 or above, half below, even though there have been no domestic terrorism casualties since 9/11.

But many people are going on as though their only concern is Valentine's Day. "I'm sure there's a threat," New York restaurateur Karen Waltuck says. "But it's not any different from the day before they did the alert to the day after. I don't see there being that much change right now, frankly."

- **The terrorist risk is still hard to measure.** As people try to digest the week's news, they execute "a sort of choreography in their heads," Syracuse's Thompson says. "You know that nothing's happened since 9/11, and you suspect this alert is hype. But you worry that there may be a wolf pounding on the door."

That's how it feels to Anna Switzer, principal of P.S. 234, an elementary school in Lower Manhattan that was closed for months after 9/11.

"Everybody is kind of aghast and nervous, and people don't know what to make of it," she says, referring to government suggestions that people prepare. "Half the reaction is, 'This is ridiculous and you can't protect yourself this way.' And half the reaction is, 'I should go out and do this.'"

- **Inevitably, absent a dramatic example of domestic terrorism, the impact of such alerts will wear off.** "I'd describe this (alert) as an upward blip on a downward trend since 9/11," Rutgers' Licklider says.

Allison Rutledge-Parisi, a New York lawyer and the mother of two girls, says her family is going through with plans to fly to Tortola in the Caribbean for a family vacation — "so I guess I'm not that nervous." Nor was she stocking up on duct tape: "I'm too busy looking for a sun hat."

- **People feel better if they do something.** "Regardless of the threat, it's most important that people feel in control of their lives," says David Barlow of Boston University's Center on Anxiety.

And so they are doing something. Holly Hughes, a Manhattan magazine editor, says she will buy bottled water and powdered milk. "I kind of wish my commute did not force me to go through either Times Square or Grand Central on the subway, but what am I going to do about it?" she asks.

"I think the fact that we're powerless is what we find so nerve-wracking. I guess if we go buy duct tape and bottled water, it makes us feel better about a vague, undefined threat," Hughes says.

Although experts differ on how effective the remedies are, everyone agrees it makes them feel better to do something.

A famously sticky tape, accordingly, has become the civilian's equivalent of an M-16 semi-automatic rifle in the war on terrorism.

"One day you're doing your normal stuff, the next day you're buying duct tape," marvels Barbara Jacob of Hazlet, N.J.

She was shopping at The Home Depot in Freehold, N.J., where Mark Wilson was buying plastic sheeting. He lives in Colts Neck, near the Earle Naval Weapons Station. Even so, Wilson says, "The ammunition dump is pretty close. I'm not sure plastic's going to help if that gets hit."

Concern coast to coast

Although New York and Washington seem to have the most to fear, the jitters are spread across the nation. A USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll shortly after the alert level was raised found the percentage of Americans who said they are very worried that they or a relative will become a victim of terrorism rose more

dramatically outside the Northeast than inside it.

And there was almost no regional difference among those who say a terrorist attack is very likely in the next several weeks.

The buying binges, as a result, were everywhere.

Demand was so great at Smith Ace Hardware in the Buckhead section of Atlanta that employees never got a chance to restock shelves with tape and plastic. "We were basically selling it off the back of the truck," manager Brennan Graves told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

In Kidron, Ohio, about 50 miles south of Cleveland, some people bought wood stoves and rainwater drums. Sales were up at Lehman's Hardware and Appliances, much as they were during the Y2K scare at the end of 1999 and again after the hijackings more than a year ago.

"Whenever something like this happens, we get a lot of phone calls," owner Glenda Lehman Ervin says. "We get a lot of questions, like, 'Do you have a wood stove that will cook and heat my house?' Or, 'How hard is it to dig a well?' Those big 50-gallon drums for rainwater — we've gotten two calls for them today. I haven't heard that in a year and a half."

Paul and Melissa Jackson of Tulsa bought two 1,000-square-foot rolls of plastic sheeting and 11 rolls of duct tape at The Home Depot. The couple say they have agreed to rendezvous with about 30 family members at their vacation house outside Tulsa if there's an attack. Their families have also obtained satellite phones in case communications are disrupted by terrorists.

"These people are crazy," Melissa Jackson says of the terrorists. "You don't know what they're going to do. We don't think anything's going to happen, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

A resident in Winsted, northern Connecticut, covered his 19th-century farmhouse with 3,500 square feet of plastic. Paul West says he had planned to cover windows of a safe room before realizing the walls were poorly insulated: "I thought it would be best to cover the whole thing."

But New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg on Thursday urged people to go out — not worry and seal themselves in, which he says can be dangerous. "If you go out in the street," he says, "most people are going about their business."

In Squirrel Hill, Pa., near Pittsburgh, Moshe Pekkar agrees. "If I go out and start buying duct tape," he says, "it means the terrorists have succeeded."

Some New Yorkers even say they're calmer than people elsewhere. "We've been through too much to be frightened," explains former New York mayor Ed Koch.

Howard Kirshenbergs says he doesn't have room in his Manhattan apartment for the three cases of canned goods he plans to buy. So he'll put them on an upper cabinet. "I figured I'll just get on a ladder and stuff it in there and leave it," he says.

Barbara Ruth, a visitor from Texas waiting in line near Times Square to buy discount theater tickets, says she was not deterred by the alert. "People should be concerned," Ruth says, "but I don't think that should keep you from seeing the world. ... You have to go on with life."

Spyros Lourus of Athens, who is visiting New York City with his wife, says their family in Greece was more worried than they were. "Every time we go into high buildings, they believe we are in danger," he says. "We aren't avoiding anything. ... We just went today to the Statue of Liberty. ... You have to come. Because you

can worry about traffic, you can worry about everything."

The orange alert did not change the color of Valentine's Day. A survey of upscale, romantic Manhattan restaurants found them all booked solid for the lovers' day.

"For Valentine's Day people are going to go out," says Waltuck, owner of Chanterelle, located near Ground Zero. "People need that."

A group of diners refused to order a chocolate dessert the other night because the chocolate was Valrhona — French — and they were angry at the French government for not supporting any U.S. military action against Iraq.

The dessert, Waltuck says, was a chocolate *bombe*. "Maybe," she admits, "that's not the right word to use."

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