

ASSAULT ON AMERICA

Local

Continued from Page 1A.

York and Washington if needed. Sports, social and theatrical events were canceled. The city was placed on a higher state of alert.

Houston Mayor Lee Brown urged citizens to remain calm and to donate blood for the victims. There was no evidence of a terrorist risk in Houston, he said, but sweeps were conducted at public buildings, and security was beefed up at the airports, the Port of Houston and the Medical Center.

"We have taken appropriate precautions," Brown said.

Some of the precautions taken by downtown businesses included letting people go home for the day. Shortly after two hijacked jetliners plowed into the World Trade Center, Shell Oil Co., BP Amoco, Dynegy, Enron, Bank One, Williams, Chevron and Wells Fargo and Vinson & Elkins closed for the day.

The ones that didn't shut completely down, such as the Pennzoil-Quaker State Co., allowed employees to leave if they wanted to.

Across the city, companies planned to be working today, said Bill Goeke, senior vice president of PM Realty Group, which manages more than 250 Houston-area buildings.

"Based on what we're hearing, it's business as usual tomorrow," he said.

Chaos ensued as commuters tried to flee downtown. Traffic was at a standstill at some intersections, and sidewalks were packed with people lugging boxes of files and bulging briefcases.

Traffic stopped dead on the eastbound and westbound lanes of South Loop 610 near Texas 288 shortly before noon when Houston police officers stopped a rental truck backing up on the eastbound service road.

The driver produced an Israeli driver's license and offered to let the officers inspect the contents of the truck, police said.

Not wanting to take any chances, the officers brought a bomb-sniffing dog to examine the truck. No explosives were detected, and the truck was found to contain only furniture. The driver was ticketed for not having a driver's license or proof of insurance and for illegally backing up on the freeway, then was released.

While nearly all Houston-area schools remained open Tuesday with heightened security, hundreds of worried parents picked up their children early and took them home.

In the Houston Independent School District, Superintendent Kaye Stripling directed principals to remain highly visible on their campuses all day and to report any suspicious activity to police.

Most school districts canceled after-school activities and practices but expected all students to be back in class today.

School officials said they do not know how many children were removed from class early, but some schools reported that the number was substantial.

A sampling of schools in HISD reported that anywhere from 30 to 70 per-



Smiley N. Pool / Chronicle

cent of their students were taken home early.

Some parents found themselves in a quandary.

Kelly Simmons decided to pick up her second-grader from Askew Elementary and let him play video games at home to distract him from news reports. But she was unsure what would be best for her sixth-grade daughter and spent the morning calling friends to find out what they were doing.

"I really think they are safer at school so they are not sitting at home watching the horror of this on television," Simmons said.

All 750 students at Varnett Charter School, however, were sent home. Director Annette Cluff said so many parents left their downtown jobs to get their children that she decided to close the school.

"All my parents were in a state of

panic," Cluff said. "Things were getting out of control and chaotic. They are scared. There's fear Houston will be a target."

University of St. Thomas officials decided to shut the 3,000-student campus about 10 a.m., and the Houston Community College System cut classes for the rest of the day.

Houstonians interviewed Tuesday expressed emotions that ran the gamut from grief to fear, anger to compassion.

"I'm extremely sad," said Jacque Abercia, a legal assistant for a law firm in Chase Tower, Houston's tallest building. "We'll never be the same again. I used to think our country was big enough and strong enough to protect American citizens. I learned today that's not true."

Rashid Shaikat, the manager of Roman Delight Pizza in the downtown tunnel system, was preparing to close his restaurant shortly after it opened. He heard about the attacks from customers. Shaikat was worried about national se-

curity and, as a Pakistani-American, about heightened prejudice against people with dark skin and foreign-sounding names.

"The American government needs to be very, very careful in how it responds," Shaikat said. "The whole globe is so close now — it has become a very small place — one family."

Shaikat's concerns were shared by local Muslim and Arab leaders, who condemned the attacks and pleaded with Americans not to mount a backlash based on race or religion.

Hospitals in the Texas Medical Center, viewed by some as potential targets for terrorist attack, tightened security measures and made room for disaster victims who might be flown in from Washington or New York City.

"In the event of a disaster, medical needs are going to be an issue. If there are those who want to cripple an area, (attacking the Medical Center is) one way," said Claire Bassett, head of com-

munications at Baylor College of Medicine. "We believe strongly it's our job to be here to provide services needed to the city."

Like aircraft across the country, the Memorial Hermann Life Flight helicopter was grounded by orders of the Federal Aviation Administration. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a health alert Tuesday to state and local public health agencies, asking officials to monitor for any possible unusual disease patterns that could be the result of chemical or biological weapons.

As a precaution, Ben Taub General Hospital erected decontamination curtains at the ambulance loading dock to shield patients who have been exposed to hazardous or contagious agents and protect hospital personnel.

"We have gone on emergency alert and everybody is being very cautious," said Medical Center spokeswoman Mary Schiflett. "We're letting every institution know to review their safety precautions, make sure everyone knows the chain of command. It's not a panic position; it's a review."

Ben Taub, which is set up to handle extreme trauma situations, discharged patients able to go home to make beds available if needed.

"We are full at the moment," said Ben Taub spokeswoman Tina Foster. "We will be discharging any patients that we can, just so we can make room, in case something happened here, or there's a need to send patients here."

Kelly Charon, a spokeswoman at the Shriners Burn Institute in Galveston, which is a part of the national disaster medical system, was poised to begin accepting patients from the disasters and was "awaiting activation."

Texas Children's Hospital postponed all elective appointments for security reasons Tuesday. They will be resumed today.

The mood at Bush Intercontinental Airport was somber.

Tammy Schroeder, her husband, Danny, and their 10-month-old daughter, Madelyn, were among more than 300 people jammed into the baggage area in Terminal C. The family was on its way to Honolulu when their flight was canceled and they heard reports of the attack in New York.

"I want to see the people who did this brought to justice as soon as possible," Danny Schroeder said. "Our thoughts and prayers are with the people who are suffering."

Hobby Airport officials decided that the airport itself would remain open, even though all flights, both arrivals and departures, were canceled.

Stranded visitors packed area hotels, especially around the airports.

In Galveston, city and port police scoured the docks for any sign of trouble. Shipping continued moving into and out of the port, but all vehicles entering and leaving the port were being inspected.

Chronicle reporters Mike Snyder, Melanie Markley, Salathia Bryant, Mike Glenn, Leigh Hopper, Claudia Feldman, Clifford Pugh, Todd Ackerman, Rad Sallee, Jo Ann Zuniga, Edward Hegstrom and Tara Dooley contributed to this story.

Attack

Continued from Page 1A.

sumed dead.

Fire officials said at least 100 and as many as 800 people may have died at the Pentagon.

The Federal Aviation Administration took the unprecedented action of grounding all commercial flights in the nation until noon today. Numerous cities, including Houston, evacuated downtown office buildings and sent schoolchildren home. Disney World in Orlando was closed.

The government sealed the U.S. border with Mexico and Canada and security around military installations was beefed up. Government business in Washington came to a virtual halt as officials evacuated the White House, the Capitol and federal buildings.

In New York, the stock market was closed and workers were forced to walk miles out of their way to get home as train service was curtailed and many bridges closed.

Bush returned to the White House in the early evening after a chaotic day. He began the morning in Florida, where he had been scheduled to promote his education agenda.

The president spent much of the day on Air Force One hopscotching around the country to military bases in Louisiana and Nebraska because of security concerns.

Bush noted in his address that thousands may have died but it was impossible to determine the exact magnitude of the carnage. "Thousands of lives were suddenly ended," Bush said.

It was anticipated, however, that the fatalities would eclipse the 2,400 Americans who lost their lives when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, a pivotal event to which Tuesday's shocking assault was being compared.

The terrorists' successful surprise attacks raised serious questions about U.S. intelligence capabilities.

Government officials had detected no clues about the meticu-

lously devised plan that involved infiltrating three large airports and piercing the airspace around the nation's heavily guarded military headquarters.

But such assessments took a back seat to the immediate need to deal with an immense tragedy whose scope far exceeded the most recent one to rock the nation, the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, where 169 died.

FBI investigators moved quickly in the search for evidence. CNN reported that an FBI search was going on in south Florida because of information found in the manifests of the airliners.

Although officials could not say definitively who was responsible for the deadly attacks, authorities suspected a number of radical Arab leaders including Afghanistan-based Osama bin Laden, who heads an international terrorist organization blamed for the coordinated bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. More than 250 people were killed.

Afghanistan's Taliban leaders denied suggestions that bin Laden was behind the attacks Tuesday. Later, explosions rocked the capital of Afghanistan but White House officials denied that they had ordered a military strike on the Muslim country.

Although some Palestinians cheered the attack, their leader, Yasser Arafat, said he was "completely shocked" by the action. Support for Israel has made the United States a past target of Middle East terrorists.

Tuesday's attack shattered what began as a pleasant, sunny morning at the 28-year old towers, which had been a landmark on the city's skyline.

The first plane struck the north tower at 8:45 a.m. EDT, prompting morning television shows to suddenly shift focus to the dramatic attack. As viewers and commentators watched in horror a second aircraft smashed into the south tower at 9:03 a.m. EDT, setting off a blaze.

As officials were beginning to digest the seriousness of those attacks, a third plane hit the Pentagon about 25 minutes later.

A total of four airplanes, two operated by American Airlines and another two by United Airlines, were hijacked and crashed.

One of the planes that flew into the World Trade Center was an American Airlines plane that had taken off from Boston and was bound for Los Angeles. Justice Department officials said that the aircraft was commandeered by suspects armed with knives.

A United Airlines flight from Boston to Los Angeles was also hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center.

A second American Airlines flight from Washington's Dulles Airport to Los Angeles was the aircraft that officials said dove into the Pentagon.

A second United Airlines planes, en route from Newark to San Francisco crashed in Shanksville, Pa., about 80 miles outside of Pittsburgh. Some officials speculated the plane's hijackers may have had Camp David, the president's retreat in the Maryland mountains, as a target.

New York, the world's financial center, clearly suffered the brunt of the attack. Mayor Giuliani said the death toll would be "horrendous."

During a news conference with New York Gov. George Pataki, Giuliani spoke grimly about the tragedy, including the sight of trapped office workers jumping to their deaths from the top floors of the burning towers.

"It was the most horrific scene I have ever seen in my whole life," he said.

In Washington police officials immediately cordoned off the area around the White House and the Washington Monument after the Pentagon attack and ordered most federal workers to go home. First lady Laura Bush, who was to testify before a Senate committee on reading, was instead whisked away to an undisclosed location. Leaders of Congress also were sheltered.

Vice President Dick Cheney and other top national security officials spent much of the day in the White House situation room, a secured area in the basement designed for emergencies.

Bush

Continued from Page 1A.

suspected of committing the worst assault on U.S. soil in the country's history.

Early in the day, speculation began circulating that Osama bin Laden — a Saudi businessman responsible for previous attacks on U.S. embassies and defense installations overseas — was behind Tuesday's strikes.

Hours later, explosions ripped through an area near Kabul, Afghanistan, which is known to be bin Laden's headquarters.

Rumsfeld denied any U.S. involvement.

"In no way is the United States government connected to those explosions," he said. As for placing blame on bin Laden, he added, "It's not the time for discussions like that."

After the attacks, U.S. intelligence intercepted communications between bin Laden supporters discussing the strikes, according to Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch, the top Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Intelligence agents listened to a conversation between two affiliates of bin Laden saying they had hit two targets in the United States, Hatch said.

Sen. Bob Graham, D-Fla. and chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, used the opportunity to point out weaknesses in the nation's intelligence apparatus, saying it had degraded since the fall of communism. He said "this occasion will drive home the point" that Congress can't skimp on its funding for U.S. covert, anti-terrorism activities.

Meanwhile, other members of Bush's Cabinet came forward to enumerate how the government will respond.

"Travelers will indeed see increased security measures at our airports, train stations and other key sites," Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta said. "There will be higher levels of surveillance, more stringent searches" and a moratorium on curbside luggage check-ins at airports.

"We ask for your patience," Mineta said in a direct appeal to

the public. "One of the most cherished freedoms is the freedom of movement, the ability to move freely and safely. But today that freedom was attacked."

Mineta also thanked Canada for accepting the 120 flights en route to the United States when the decision was made to shut down all U.S. air traffic.

Attorney General John Ashcroft said "crime scenes" have been established in cities where the flights originated and where they crashed, including New York, the Washington area, Pittsburgh, Boston and Newark, N.J.

He also asked that anyone with information on the attacks contact the FBI via a special Web site: www.ifcfdi.gov.

Medical and mortuary teams, including 6,000 health professionals, were dispatched to New York and the Pentagon in Northern Virginia by the Department of Health and Human Services.

HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson made a plea to all Americans: "No matter where you live, please do your civic duty and assist us by donating blood."

FEMA director Joe Allbaugh said his agency sent out eight "urban search and rescue task forces," including engineers, other technical support and dogs trained in finding people lost in rubble.

Meanwhile, scores of Congress members returned to the Capitol building Tuesday night to vow revenge on the attackers and strike a chord of national unity, singing *God Bless America*.

"It was just spontaneous," said Majority Whip Tom DeLay, R-Sugar Land. "It was a spontaneous outburst from the members of the House and Senate. The best response came from the press — a hurrah and applause. I think it was an expression of what we're all feeling, an expression of sadness as well as anger."

Sen. John Warner of Virginia, the highest ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, called on all nations to join in their resolve against the attackers. "The United States has born the brunt, but who can be next? Step forward and let us hold accountable and punish those that have perpetrated this attack."

The committee's chairman, Sen. Carl Levin, a Democrat from Michigan, said both parties would work in unity to "track down and root out" terrorism.

Texas lawmakers were shocked, infuriated and even humbled by the day's events.

"It certainly brought the rest of the world home to us. Ireland, the Middle East, have all had to live this," said Rep. Kevin Brady, R-The Woodlands.

Fear of other attacks led to a shutdown of the city, including the Capitol and adjacent six large congressional buildings. Lawmakers vowed Tuesday night to return to work today to show terrorists they can't "shut down democracy."

Lawmakers from both parties agreed that the United States must make it clear to terrorists everywhere that the United States is now at war with its attackers.

"However long it takes, those who committed this crime and anyone who aided them will be hunted down," said Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas. "Those who live in the shadows and visit terror on the innocent have new reason to fear because a terrible justice is coming. And those few for whom death holds no dread should be doubly afraid because they have awakened a giant who will eradicate them and all they stand for."

As soon as Congress returns to work, lawmakers intend to pass a bipartisan resolution that states Congress' "complete and total" support of President Bush.

"We stand completely and totally behind our president," said Sen. Chris Dodd, a Democrat from Connecticut and chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Lawmakers had come to work Tuesday expecting to have another day of partisan rancor over the budget. But as events unfolded, they ended the day as united American lawmakers.

"As we mourn the loss of innocent American lives, I stand firmly with the president in condemning these acts," said Rep. Ken Bentsen, D-Houston.

Houston Chronicle reporter Kim Cobb contributed to this report.