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JITTERS

These Days, Even Soap Is a Suspicious Powder

By RICHARD LEZIN JONES

Scenes from a region on edge. In Westchester County, a postal worker discovered a white powder on top of a package in the New Rochelle Post Office around 8:45 a.m. yesterday and notified his supervisor. Two postal inspectors investigated. The substance? Powdered soap.

Fire trucks and a hazardous materials removal truck were summoned to the Gateway office complex in downtown Newark because someone spied an unfamiliar powder on a bathroom floor. It turned out to be a cleaning compound.

And in New York City, riders on more than a half-dozen subway lines experienced delays of up to 30 minutes while the authorities investigated reports of mysterious packages and powdery substances. A transportation spokeswoman said the reports had so far all proved unfounded.

As anthrax-related incidents were confirmed in the offices of Gov. George E. Pataki and in Washington, the anxiety in an already tense New York City and its neighboring communities seemed to ratchet up yesterday as officials scrambled to respond to fears of other possible cases.

It was an uphill battle. New York City police officials said that officers of its hazardous materials units responded to 76 possible anthrax cases around the city. Of those, officers felt that 27 incidents warranted the removal of items for further inspection and testing.

New York City Transit reported seven cases of suspicious packages or powders on its subway lines, ranging from a 7:30 a.m. report of powder at the Wall Street station of the Nos. 1 and 2 lines to a midday report of a suspicious package at the 79th Street stop of the No. 1 line to an afternoon report of powder on the F line at Roosevelt Avenue.

"So far, they've all been unfounded," said Deirdre Parker, a

spokeswoman for New York City Transit.

The reports even came from the classroom as Board of Education officials announced that testing was being conducted on envelopes mailed to three schools: Public School 194 in Manhattan, Junior High School 99 in Manhattan and P.S. 61 in the Bronx.

In Newark, officials confirmed that they had investigated 50 calls of suspicious items — from letters without return addresses to powdery substances of all kinds — but they declined to provide details.

"We're not being too specific about the types because we don't want to give people ideas," one official said.

And there were what seemed, in this climate, to be serious incidents, like the report that New Jersey authorities had issued a nationwide bulletin for a tractor-trailer stolen from Morris County overnight Tuesday. It was loaded with fertilizer and pesticides — the potential ingredients for a bomb. The State Police said they had no reason to believe it had been stolen by terrorists.

Health officials in New York City said that they had received 3,732 calls to a special telephone hot line that offered information about anthrax. And pharmacists and other health workers reported a continued run on the antibiotic Cipro.

Meanwhile, in New York, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani tried to allay public fears, saying that some concern was warranted while cautioning against panic. "I don't think it helps to have people overreacting to all of this," he said.

Some were pragmatic about the risks they faced. Asked if she feared anthrax, Jodi Fink, a psychiatrist from Hoboken, replied: "Who is going to send me any powder? Who am I in the scheme of things?"

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