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Lethal spores found at off-site postal facility

By Deborah Orin and Brian Blomquist in D.C. and Tracy Connor in N.Y.

The White House said yesterday it suspects terrorists linked to the Sept. 11 attacks on America are behind the anthrax crisis — just before the bombshell discovery of the deadly spores at its mail-screening facility.

"There is a suspicion that this is connected to international terrorists," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said, adding that probers have not ruled out a lone culprit. "Our nation is under attack as a result of these mailings."

Asked whether the sabotage that has killed three people was tied to the strikes at the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Fleischer said: "That's been the operating suspicion of the White House."

The blunt analysis came on a day of fast-breaking developments:

■ A postal worker from Hamilton, N.J., is in serious condition with the state's first suspected case of inhalation anthrax.

■ Officials confirmed inhaled anthrax was the culprit in the deaths of two Washington postal workers.

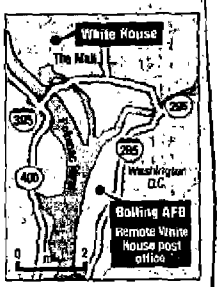
■ The feds released the threatening, taunting contents of bacteria-laden letters sent to NBC anchor Tom Brokaw and Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle.

But the biggest news of the day was confirmation of anthrax at the White House's off-site facility, identified by sources as Bolling Air Force Base, a few miles away.

The facility has been closed for screening and decontamination. All tests at the White House have come back negative.

"I'm confident when I come to work tomorrow that I'll be safe," President Bush said. Asked if he was tested, he repeated: "I don't have anthrax."

Questioned about the likelihood that Osama bin Laden's band of terrorists is behind the scare, Bush said: "It wouldn't surprise me that [al Qaeda] is involved in it, but I have no direct evidence."



The White House facility is the latest in a string of sites stung by the anthrax bug, including American Media Inc., NBC, CBS, ABC, The Post, and post offices in Florida, Washington, D.C., and New Jersey.

The Hamilton worker, a middle-aged woman, showed up at Virtua Memorial Hospital in Mount Holly, N.J., on Friday with flu-like symptoms.

The feds determined yesterday she likely has inhaled the most dangerous form of anthrax.

Two other New Jersey postal workers have the less serious skin anthrax: a West Trenton mail carrier and a Hamilton letter sorter.

The Hamilton center processed Sept. 18 letters to Brokaw and The Post and an Oct. 8 note to Daschle. Nineteen out of 59 tests in a second round of samples from the facility came back positive yesterday, the state said.

The Brentwood post office in Washington that handled the Daschle letter on the receiving end spawned its own crop of cases.

Thomas Morris Jr., 55, and Joseph Curseen, 47, died within hours of being hospitalized, and anthrax is strongly suspected in four cases of sick postal workers and is a possibility in a dozen others.

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