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For U.N. Delegates, Extraordinary Security

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UNITED NATIONS, Nov. 10—U.N. officials imposed extraordinary security measures on delegates attending the U.N. General Assembly, forcing President Bush and other world leaders to pass through metal detectors and searching their ambassadors' bags.

The tight security reflected mounting concerns of a terrorist attack against the United Nations during its annual meeting. Last week, Saudi exile Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network called the United Nations its enemy and Secretary General Kofi Annan a "criminal."

"There has been concern about the security of this building since September 11th," said U.N. communications director Edward Mortimer. "We all remembered that in 1993 a map of the U.N. building was found in the house of the chap who blew up the World Trade Center on that occasion. The moment we saw what happened to the World Trade Center, we thought, gosh, are we likely to be next?"

Since the Sept. 11 attacks in New York and Washington, the U.N.'s East River headquarters on First Avenue have been shielded by a fleet of sand-packed orange garbage trucks. Workers were moved on Sept. 12 from their offices in the 39-story building to the basement after federal authorities learned that terrorists had planned to strike. But authorities determined there was no immediate danger.

Michael McCann, head of U.N. security, declined to comment on specific threats. He said the United Nations has been at its highest state of alert since the September 2000 U.N. millennium summit, which drew more than 150 world leaders.

McCann said the latest threats had forced the United Nations for the first time to compel delegates to be searched. But he noted that most envoys took it in stride. "They realize we're doing it for everyone's benefit."

After setting off the metal detector alarm, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez patted down his coat pockets to show police he wasn't carrying anything. But U.N. police were ordered to spare the leaders from a body search. Security officers asked El Salvador's permanent representative, Jose Roberto Andino Salazar, to open his leather attaché case.

Still, the spectacle of a U.S. president striding through a metal detector to deliver his speech in the General Assembly auditorium shocked some. "Did George Bush really go through it?" Mortimer asked. "Maybe we are an organization based on the equality of sovereign states."

More than 40 world leaders and 100 foreign ministers are to address the 189-member General Assembly, which closes Nov. 16. The session, originally scheduled to begin Sept. 24, was postponed for the first time in the organization's 56-year history because of concerns it would overwhelm the resources of U.S. law enforcement authorities at a critical stage in the World Trade Center recovery effort and investigation.

But many countries sent high-level delegations to show their support for the international counter-terrorism campaign.

In his address today, Bush touched on bin Laden's threat against the United Nations to underscore the case for joining forces against the Saudi millionaire.

"Every nation has a stake in this cause," Bush said. "Last week, anticipating this meeting of the General Assembly, they denounced the United Nations. They called our secretary general a criminal and condemned all Arab nations here as traitors to Islam."

Al Qaeda has long viewed the United Nations as a cover for U.S. expansionism in the Muslim world. It blames the United Nations for authorizing the U.S.-led Persian Gulf War to drive Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1990.

In a videotaped broadcast on the Qatar-based al-Jazeera network, bin Laden blasted the Security Council and General Assembly for passing resolutions condemning the Sept. 11 attacks and supplying Washington with the legitimacy it sought to carry out its terrorism campaign.

"Those who want to solve our problems at the United Nations are hypocrites who [try to] deceive God, his prophet and believers, because our suffering is caused by the U.N.," he said. "It is an instrument of crime."

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