

ATTACKS
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At the World Trade Center, the dead and the doomed plummeted from the skyscrapers, leaving a man and woman clinging to each other.

More than nine hours after the Sept. 11 attacks began, explosions could be heard north of the Afghan capital of Kabul, but American officials said the United States was not responsible.

Officials across the world condemned the attacks but in the West Bank city of Nablus, thousands of Palestinians celebrated, chanting "God is Great" and handing out candy. The United States has become increasingly unpopular in the Mideast in the last year of Israeli-Palestinian fighting, with Washington widely seen as siding with Israel against the Arab world.

At the Pentagon, the symbol and command center for the nation's military force, one side of the building collapsed as smoke billowed over the Potomac River. Rep. Ike Skelton, briefed by Pentagon officials, said, "There appear to be about 100 casualties in the building."

The first airstrike occurred shortly before 8:45 a.m. EDT. By evening, huge clouds of smoke billowed from the ruins. A burning, 47-story part of the World Trade Center complex — already evacuated — collapsed in flames just before nightfall.

Emergency Medical Service worker Louis Garcia said initial reports indicated that bodies were buried beneath the two feet of soot on streets around the trade center.

"A lot of the vehicles are running over bodies because they're all over the place," he said.

For the first time, the nation's aviation system was completely shut down as officials considered the frightening flaws that had been exposed in security procedures. Financial markets were closed, too.

Top leaders of Congress were led to an undisclosed location, as

were key officials of the Bush administration. Guards armed with automatic weapons patrolled the White House grounds and military aircraft secured the skies above the capital city.

In Afghanistan, where bin Laden has been given asylum, the nation's hardline Taliban rulers rejected suggestions he was responsible.

Abdel-Bari Atwan, editor of the Al-Quds al-Arabi newspaper, said he received a warning from Islamic fundamentalists close to bin Laden, but had not taken the threat seriously. "They said it would be a huge and unprecedented attack, but they did not specify," said Atwan in a telephone interview in London.

This is how Tuesday's mayhem unfolded:

At about 8:45 a.m., a hijacked airliner crashed into the north tower of the trade center, the 25-year-old, glass-and-steel complex that was once the world's tallest building.

The enormity of the disaster was just sinking in when 18 minutes later, the south tower also was hit by a plane.

The chaos was just beginning. Workers stumbled down scores of flights, their clothing torn and their lungs filled with smoke and dust.

John Axisa said he ran outside and watched people jump out of the first building; then there was a second explosion, and he felt the heat on the back of his neck.

Donald Burns, 34, was being evacuated from the 82nd floor when he saw four people in the stairwell. "I tried to help them but they didn't want anyone to touch them. The fire had melted their skin. Their clothes were tattered," he said.

Worse was to come. At 9:50, one tower collapsed, sending debris and dust cascading to the ground. At 10:30, the other tower crumbled. Glass doors shattered, police and firefighters ushered people into subway stations and buildings. The air was black, from the pavement to the sky. The dust and ash were inches deep along the streets.

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said it was believed the after effects of the plane crashes eventually brought the buildings down, not planted explosive devices.

"This building would have stood had a plane or a force caused by a plane smashed into it," he said. "But steel melts, and 24,000 gallons of aviation fluid melted the steel. Nothing is designed or will be designed to withstand that fire."

At mid-afternoon, Giuliani said 1,500 "walking wounded" had been shipped to Liberty State Park in New Jersey by ferry and tugboat, and 750 others were taken to New York City hospitals, among them 150 in critical condition.

Bridges and tunnels were closed to all but pedestrians. Subways were shut down for much of the day; commuter trains were not running.

Meanwhile, at about 9:30 a.m., an airliner hit the Pentagon — the five-sided headquarters of the American military. "There was screaming and pandemonium," said Terry Yonkers, an Air Force civilian employee at work inside the building.

The military boosted security across the country to the highest levels, sending Navy ships to New York and Washington to assist with air defense and medical needs.

A half-hour after the Pentagon attack, a United Airlines Flight 93, a Boeing 757 jetliner en route from Newark, N.J., to San Francisco, crashed about 80 miles southeast of Pittsburgh.

Airline officials said the other three planes that crashed were American Airlines Flight 11, a Boeing 767 from Boston to Los Angeles, apparently the first to hit the Trade Center; United Airlines Flight 175, also a Boeing 767 from Boston to Los Angeles, which an eyewitness said was the second to hit the skyscrapers; and American Airlines Flight 77, a Boeing 757 en route from Washington-Dulles to Los Angeles that a source said hit the Pentagon.

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