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A new kind of powderkeg

THE bombs and missiles of the US and its allies were already in the air the moment the suicide terrorist squad rammed commandeered passenger aircraft into New York's World Trade Center and Washington's Pentagon on September 11. On Sunday night, they started to land - supposedly and hopefully only - on selected al-Qaeda bases of Osama bin Laden and the military installations of the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan. President George W. Bush had in the past weeks been building up to the move, actively seeking support not only among the people in his own country but also nations around the globe, carefully stressing that the US was declaring war on terrorism and not Islam. "We are the friends of almost a billion worldwide who practise the Islamic faith. The United States of America is an enemy of those who aid terrorists and of the barbaric criminals who profane a great religion by committing murder in its name," he reiterated in a televised address on Sunday minutes after the strikes were launched just before 9.00pm Afghan time.

British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said yesterday 30 military targets across Afghanistan were struck. They included suspected terrorist training camps, military airfields and air defence sites. In Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad decried the US and British air strikes, saying innocent people will die. "Our stand is that the problems that caused these terrorists to do what they did have to be looked into," he said. Elsewhere, Iraq immediately condemned the attack as "treacherous aggression", and Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused Washington of "lying" about its true intentions. There were also some pockets of protests, but most other governments understood if not support the action. No matter how justified a reprisal by US is, the first world crisis of the new millennium is now set to escalate quickly to a whole different level. This has caused another heavy sell-off on the already overwrought stock markets, as investors try to digest the latest developments, including the fact that it will be no quick war, but one that may drag on for weeks and months.

Bush admitted as much in his address. He called for patience while promising a "sustained, comprehensive and relentless" campaign to exact justice, but he also warned Americans to be alert against new attacks by terrorists. The strikes under way are but the first wave of course, with the express intention of initially disabling key Afghan defence resources and "softening up" the Taliban forces for concerted ground assault that will follow. The US-led "coalition" is counting on the backing of Afghan opposition Northern Alliance troops, and possibly a warlord here and there, in its plan to overthrow the Taliban, which it accuses of harbouring bin Laden, the prime suspect in the attacks on New York and Washington.

It has been noted that it is the first time ever that while one section of a country and population is attacked, another is being fed and "cared for" through food aid and medical supplies, especially at the border with Pakistan. The humanitarian efforts show that the US is fully aware global opinions can quickly change if a military triumph by Western Christian forces and their massive war machine is at the expense of the lives of innocent poverty-stricken Muslim Afghans. Bush is certainly facing the direst test of his young presidency.

Having to bolster a faltering economy at home aside, he must now also be

prepared to fight a war that has every prospect of becoming one that is without borders, without fronts and without a timeframe. Already, bin Laden in turning attention on American policies in West Asia has vowed in a videotaped message: "I swear to God that America will not live in peace before peace reigns in Palestine."

Coupled with the Taliban's pledge to avenge what it describes as "terrorist attacks targeted at the whole Muslim world", fears have been heightened that the al Qaeda network may activate some long-planned plots against American targets in retaliation. Bush said "all law enforcement and intelligence agencies are working aggressively around America, around the world and around the clock." Britain has likewise boosted security at Buckingham Palace and other London landmarks. The world has found itself faced with a new kind of powderkeg, one that threatens to implode as well as explode.

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