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Anthrax letter `tampered with' (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - As United States authorities confirmed today the 12 Americans exposed to the deadly anthrax were victims of bio-terrorism, Malaysian police said the letter purportedly sent from Malaysia and laced with the bacteria was tampered with.

Deputy Inspector General of Police Tan Sri Jamil Johari said in Kuala Terengganu the letter from Microsoft Licensing in Reno was returned to the sender after the addressee in Malaysia could not be contacted.

At this juncture, authorities here and in the US do not know at which stage the letter was tampered with, and by whom.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told reporters this morning that the authorities here could only carry out investigations if their counterparts in the US provided adequate information.

Speaking after recording the Bersama Perdana Menteri programme at Angkasapuri which was aired over TV1 tonight, he said investigations could only begin once they received the information.

As the anthrax scare extended beyond the US to Australia and Brazil, the search for clues worldwide intensified.

Various government auxiliaries were alerted into action here to tackle what could be a possible anthrax source with police in New York, Sydney and Rio de Janeiro occupied with calls from the public about packages containing suspicious material.

And with time, there seems to be increasing scepticism about the possibility of the bacteria originating from Malaysia.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar told reporters he regretted the New York Times report which had alleged that the letter was from Malaysia although this had yet to be confirmed.

He said this after receiving US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, who is also a special envoy of President George W. Bush.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia viewed the matter seriously as such an act could instil fear.

"We are not anthrax producers. The NYT report, which was also carried by our newspapers, gives an indication that the letter was actually sent from Malaysia.

Adding that he had also raised the issue with Zoellick during their 40-minute meeting, he said little was known about the origins of the letter.

National Poison Centre Research and Documentation head Professor Dr Mohamed Isa Abdul Majid said in Penang that Malaysia did not have facilities to produce the bacteria for germ warfare.

The four people in the US who had contact with the letter from Malaysia have tested negative for contamination by the bacteria.

Information on two more people there in similar circumstances will be known on Monday.

In another development, Health Ministry Parliamentary Secretary S. Sothinathan said his officials were expecting leads from the police to help them plan strategies to protect the public from a possible anthrax scare.

He said such information would also help the Ministry mobilise officers to screen those who had come in contact with the letter.

"We are expecting the police to give us the lead," he told the New Straits Times.

He said the ministry had called for a meeting of medical officers,

comprising virologist, microbiologists, representatives from the Institute of Medical Research, Ministry's disease control department and other relevant agencies tomorrow to discuss the matter..

The meeting is expected to be headed by the Ministry's deputy director-general.

Meanwhile, Microsoft (M) Sdn Bhd public relations manager Chin Tih Tih said the company was awaiting further information from its headquarters in Seattle.

"It is business as usual for us. We are keeping in touch with our headquarters over this matter and todate, there is no specific directive on preventive measures to take," she said.

On whether the letter in Reno was returned by a vendor in Malaysia, Chin said it was premature to respond to this as investigations were still in progress.

Asked the possibility of identifying the vendor to which the letter was sent to, Chin said Microsoft had many vendors including retailers.

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