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Next priority is terrorist nukes, says Bush

CHARLESTON, Dec 12: The "next priority" in the war on terrorism will be preventing terrorists from securing nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, US President George W. Bush said on Tuesday.

In remarks apparently designed to put Iraq, Iran and North Korea on notice, Bush said the United States "cannot accept" other countries providing terrorists with weapons of mass destruction or the means to deliver them, including missiles, and held out the defeated Taliban as an example of their fate should they continue to sponsor terrorists.

Bush made the remarks in a speech to cadets at The Citadel, a military academy in the state of South Carolina, where two years ago as a presidential candidate he outlined his views for "transforming" the US military to meet the challenges of the new century.

He lavished praise on the US armed forces for their unprecedented use of special forces, pinpoint aerial bombing and coordination with friendly ground troops in Afghanistan as "rewriting the rules of warfare". And he warned that the United States would not tire in its pursuit of Osama bin Laden, blamed by Washington for the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

"No cave is deep enough to escape the patient justice of the United States of America," Bush said, referring to the network of caves and tunnels in eastern Afghanistan where bin Laden and his al-Qaeda lieutenants are believed to be hiding.

The centrepiece of his speech was the emphasis on weapons of mass destruction, a new objective of his war on terror he first enunciated two weeks ago.

He said he had ordered his advisers to develop a comprehensive strategy to counter the proliferation of such weapons. "The great threat to civilization is that a few evil men will multiply their murders and gain the means to kill on a scale equal to their hatred," he said.

"Our lives, our way of life, and our every hope for the world depend on a single commitment - the authors of mass murder must be defeated and never allowed to gain or use the weapons of mass destruction," he said.

Meeting that threat will involve destroying " sleeper cells " of terrorists, cutting off financing and other means already part of the US war on terror, he said. "Above all, we are acting to end the state sponsorship of terror," he added. "Rogue states are clearly the most likely sources of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons for terrorists.

Every nation now knows that we cannot accept and we will not accept states that harbour, finance, train or equip the agents of terror. "Those nations that violate this principle will be regarded as hostile regimes. They have been warned, they are being watched and they will be held accountable," he said.

With Afghanistan's Taliban regime decimated by the US-led military campaign, Bush expressed confidence that other regimes would mend their ways and cut off support for terrorism.

"For states that support terror, it's not enough that the consequences be costly; they must be devastating," he said. "The more credible this reality, the more likely that regimes will change their behaviour, making it less likely that America need to use overwhelming force against them."

Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Syria, North Korea, Libya and Cuba are the seven states listed by the US government as sponsors of terrorism.

Last month, Bush demanded that Saddam Hussein allow United Nations weapons inspectors back into Iraq or "find out" the consequences.-dpa