

World

IN BRIEF

Study shows limits on AIDS awareness

UNITED NATIONS — The largest global study of AIDS awareness ever compiled by the United Nations has found that most people in developing nations have now heard of the disease but that a significant number have little knowledge of how to avoid it. Most of those people questioned in more than three dozen countries believed that AIDS could not strike them and, as a result, were not changing their sexual habits enough to meet the threat. Many men and women said they were limiting sexual activity to one partner as a way to avoid infection, but fewer than 8 percent of women and 15 percent to 25 percent of men said they had begun using condoms with those partners.

Bomb plot suspect arrested in Canada

MONTREAL — Canadian police have arrested an Algerian immigrant who is wanted in the Netherlands on suspicion of being part of a plot to bomb the U.S. Embassy in Paris last September. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police said they arrested the suspect, Adel Tobbichi, 34, here Friday. The Canadians are also investigating suspicions that Tobbichi's group had links to al-Qaida.

Venezuelan president tightening security

CARACAS, Venezuela — President Hugo Chavez said there were several plots to assassinate or overthrow him but vowed that increased security and intelligence gathering following a short-lived coup would thwart any such conspiracies. Chavez said Friday he has scaled down public appearances for security reasons since he was ousted for less than 48 hours in mid-April. He said his government uncovered an assassination plot involving "mercenary groups" in Latin America and that anti-aircraft batteries were installed near the presidential palace after agents learned of an "audacious" plan to attack it.

Defendants say they were framed by FBI

HYDERABAD, Pakistan — Two co-defendants in the kidnap-murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl claimed Saturday they were framed by the FBI and tortured by Pakistani police into making confessions. The claims by Salman Saqil and co-defendant Fahad Naseem came a day after chief defendant Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh accused Pakistani authorities of fabricating the case against him. The trial was adjourned until Thursday.

Malaysia's leader decides not to quit

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — In a bizarre flip-flop, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad announced his resignation Saturday, then changed his mind after supporters begged him to stay. The political drama was denounced by the opposition Islamic fundamentalist party as a ploy to gain support ahead of elections. But the Islamic fundamentalists also suffered uncertainty when party leader Fadzil Noor, 65, died early Friday. Noor failed to regain consciousness following a heart pass surgery Tuesday.

Floods devastating southern Russia

ROSTOV-ON-DON, Russia — Flooding in southern Russia has claimed at least 28 lives and forced up to 20,000 to leave their homes, emergency officials said Saturday. The floods have hit 19 southern Russian regions. Some of the victims were killed when their homes collapsed while others died of exposure or heart attacks that authorities linked to the flooding, officials said.

2 more North Koreans seek embassy asylum

BEIJING — Two more North Korean women slipped past heavy Chinese security and got into the South Korean Embassy, joining 21 other asylum-seekers in Seoul's diplomatic offices in Beijing, a South Korean official said Saturday. The two women, ages 27 and 30, entered the embassy Friday night.

Islam taking root in southern Mexico

By DUDLEY ALTHAUS
Houston Chronicle

SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, Mexico — In recent years, Agustin Gomez Mendez and other Maya Indians in far southern Mexico have taken yet one more sharp turn in a long quest for redemption, deciding that Jesus Christ isn't their personal savior after all.

"There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger," says Gomez Mendez, a poor farmer and father of six who converted his family to Islam in 1996 under the tutelage of Spanish missionaries.

Over the past few years, about 300 evangelical Christian Maya have converted to Islam in southernmost Chiapas state, which has been riven by spiritual struggles for centuries.

The conversions have left the Muslim Maya's neighbors and academics mystified. But their missionary guides hope the new Muslims will prove the first in a wave of converts in Mexico.

The missionaries themselves are but the latest in a long line of religious teachers who have tried to mold the Maya soul. Dominican monks arrived in these chilly highlands with Spanish conquerors nearly 500 years ago. They were followed by Presbyterians, Pentecostals, evangelical preachers, left-wing Roman Catholic priests and Mormons.

But the Islamic Spaniards are the first of their kind here.

And they have forged a small but devoted following among the Maya.

"I was looking for God," says Gomez Mendez, "I made the decision to become a slave of God."

A missionary leader, Esteban Lopez, 52, says the Maya of Chiapas had been abandoned by Mexican society and are ripe for the Islamic group's message of another path.

"They have lost their culture, everything," he says. "Islam allows them to return to their roots."

Most of the new Muslims once belonged to Chiapas vibrant community of evangelical Christian Maya, which has been gaining thousands of converts since the first U.S. missionaries arrived 45 years ago.

The evangelicals rejected the traditional faith of their home communities, which mixes ancient Maya beliefs with 16th-century Roman Catholic tenets.

They refused to participate in or pay for festivals they considered pagan. They also gave up the heavy alcohol intake that often defines village life.

The evangelicals' defiance of the status quo and a critical shortage of farmland led to their expulsion in recent decades from San Juan Chamula, a tradition-bound cluster of villages a few miles north of San Cristobal.

Since the early 1970s, Gomez Mendez and thousands of evangelicals have crowded onto the steep mountain slopes on San Cristobal's north side. Competition for the faithful has long been fierce among the dozens of churches that dot the neighborhoods. And many Chamulan evangelicals have switched congregations frequently, going where the message is stronger and benefits better, experts say.

"They change religions like they change socks," says Abdias Tovilla, a non-Indian who heads a coalition of Protestant churches in San Cristobal. "As long as a church is helping them, they are happy."

But Tovilla and other experts say some Maya evangelicals, though fervently religious, never fully embraced their new faith. Shorn from the centuries-old traditions of their community, they keep searching for a path to God.

Lorenzo Gomez, 67, was among the spiritual wanderers.

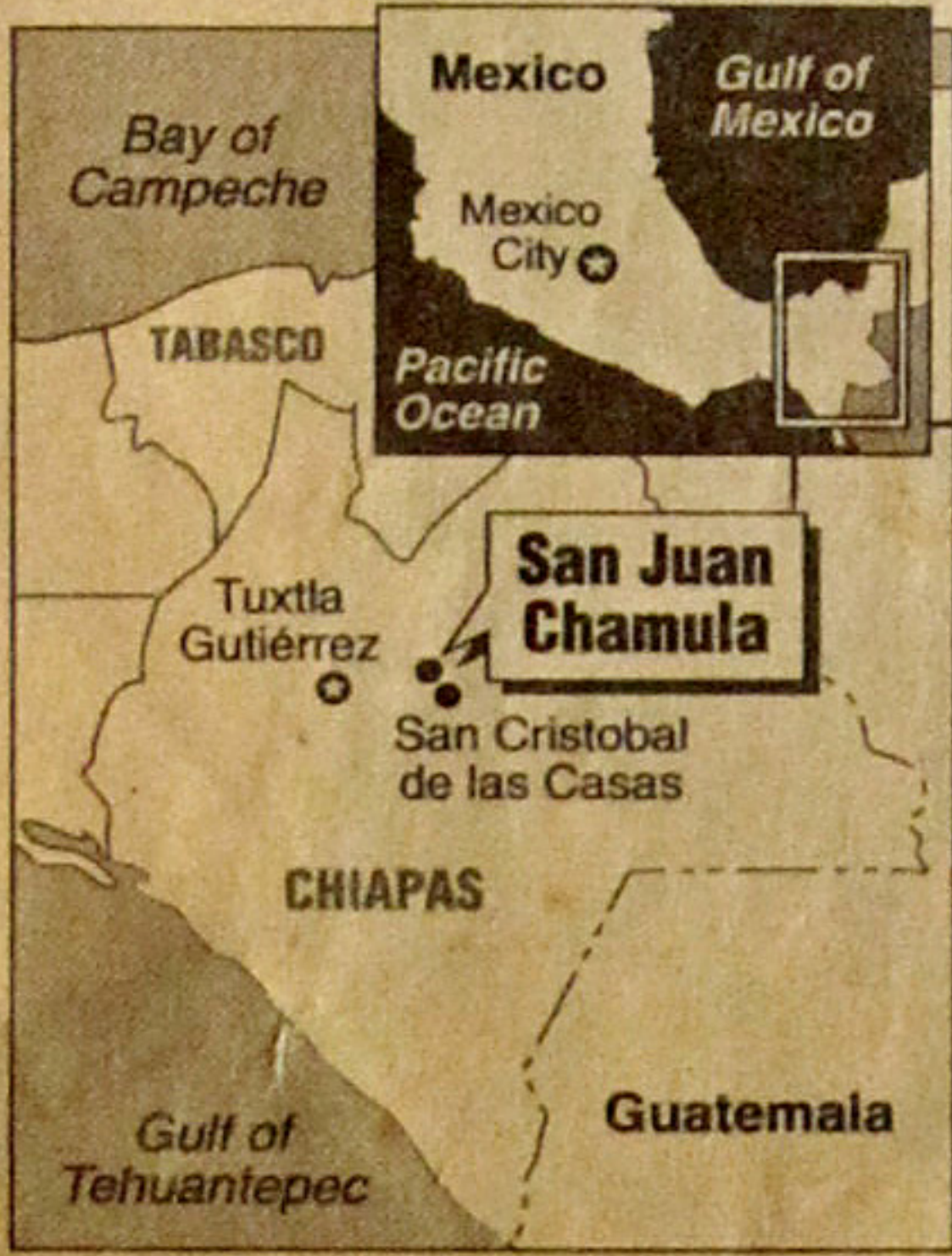
"I didn't feel secure in the reli-



Janet Schwartz / Chronicle

Dominga Gomez Hernandez, 45, who goes by the Arabic name Huaraca, her son Ahmed, and daughter Saira are Maya Indians in

Mexico's Chiapas state who have converted to Islam. About 300 former evangelical Christians there now practice Islam.



Chronicle

gion," says the convert now known by his Muslim name, Mohammed Ali. "I have always had in my mind that I am not good, not safe. I should know more about what is in the world, how to be right with our lord."

The Spanish Islamic missionaries arrived in 1995, amid turmoil caused by rebellion a year earlier by the mostly Maya Zapatista National Liberation Army. Starting slowly, the Spaniards began speaking about Islam to any Maya who would listen and wooing evangelical leaders.

In 1996, the Muslims offered to help the evangelicals establish a new market in San Cristobal, attracting many to the planning meetings.

Among those attending was Agustin Gomez Mendez, who then belonged to a Church of God congregation. Many people left when the talk at the meetings turned to Islam, but he stayed.

"I went to listen about the market but started to listen to the message," he says.

Like other Muslim converts here, Gomez Mendez says he was largely untroubled by abandoning the central article of Christian faith: that Jesus Christ is the son of God.

"I realized that God is only he who created everything," he says. "The creator cannot have children. Jesus wasn't God. He was a prophet."

The 300 Muslims in Chiapas join several hundred others sprinkled throughout this largely Catholic nation of 100 million, according to Omar Weston, director-general of the Muslim Center in Mexico City. That num-



Dudley Althaus / Chronicle

Several Maya men, who are former evangelical Christians, concentrate on a prayer and ritual practiced across the world by millions of Mus-

lims. Islamic Spaniard missionaries have descended on Chiapas to preach the Quran and have developed a small but devoted following.

ber pales in comparison to the estimated 1 million in Brazil and 300,000 in Argentina.

Today, the Chiapas Muslims are headquartered in a handful of houses and low-slung buildings along a two-lane beltway that skirts San Cristobal, a colonial city of 100,000.

Partly with financing from abroad, the Chiapas Muslims began creating businesses to employ the new faithful.

The four dozen children at their *madrassa*, or school, spend 90 minutes a day studying the Quran and Islamic teachings in Arabic, says Lopez, the missionary. Classes also include mathematics, geography, Spanish and other lessons. But the greater mission, Lopez says, is to forge a pure Islamic society.

Lopez and the other Spaniards are members of the Murabitun, a largely European group of converts to the mystical Sufi strain of Islam. The group hopes to return to the fundamental Islam lived by the prophet Muhammad, the founder of the Islamic religion, and his early followers.

"We are going to the origins of when Islam first came to earth," Lopez says, "trying to purify it. There isn't a pure Islamic government in the world. That's what we hope to create. An authentic answer."

The group's spiritual leader, Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi, a Scotsman, has sharply condemned democracy and global capitalism. But he also recently spoke out against the terrorism of Sept. 11, arguing that the terrorists' real aim was to discredit and destroy Islam.

Active in South Africa, Chechnya, England, Spain and elsewhere, the Murabitun have been accused of being anti-Semitic. They have also been dismissed by many mainstream Muslims as a quasi-Islamic cult.

Arriving as they have on the heels of the Zapatistas' uprising, the Muslims have spurred unease, if not outright hostility, among many in Chiapas. State and federal officials have investigated the group's finances and motives. Coverage in the local press has been largely negative.

Many academics who study the Maya view the group with a blend of suspicion and bemusement. Most Christians hold them at arms length.

In fact, some who originally flocked to the Spanish-led Muslims abandoned them with equal fervor.

"I did it for just a while," says Mateo Gomez Collazo, 42, who briefly sojourned with the Muslims four years ago. "It's difficult to leave my Christ behind."

But while they've deserted the Murabitun, the dissidents seem resolute in their new faith.

Agustin Gomez Mendez and a handful of neighbors have built their own Islamic center a few miles from the main Muslim compound.

Gomez Mendez prays toward Mecca five times a day. The Quran, in Spanish and Arabic, anchors Islamic texts on a small bookshelf in his house.

He intends to teach his children, who go by Arabic names, to live in submission to Allah.

"I am happy being Muslim," he says.

Blast at U.S. Consulate attributed to fertilizer bomb

Washington Post

KARACHI, Pakistan — Investigators now believe the June 14 explosion outside the U.S. Consulate here was caused by a huge fertilizer bomb loaded aboard a pickup driven by a suicide bomber, according to Pakistani and U.S. officials close to the investigation.

FBI experts estimate the bomb weighed 500 pounds. It was so powerful that it reduced the pickup to pieces so small and scattered that they were initially taken for shards of another vehicle, a Toyota Corolla owned by a driving school. Investigators now believe that car, which carried five Pakistani women, was merely near the explosion, not the

cause of it. All five women died, along with seven other Pakistani passers-by and the driver of the pickup.

The previous theory, that a bomb was hidden in the Corolla without the occupants' knowledge, confounded investigators because it entailed the deliberate killing of unwitting Muslim women and a remote-control detonator. Investigators see the consulate bombing as the latest in a string of suicide attacks Islamic militants have launched against Western targets in Pakistan, with the apparent assistance of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida terrorist network.

The breakthrough came after close examination of the bomb crater on Abdullah Haroon Road outside the consulate. The crater

'The explosion was so huge that it literally blasted the bomb-laden Suzuki pickup van into thousands of metal pieces.'

Pakistani official

yielded engine parts that duplicated those recovered from the Corolla elsewhere.

"The explosion was so huge that it literally blasted the bomb-laden Suzuki pickup van into thousands of metal pieces," a senior Pakistani intelligence official said Saturday.

The pickup also appeared on a videotape from a consulate secu-

rity camera, according to a source close to the investigation. The camera was turned away from the site of the explosion, but it recorded the traffic approaching the site in the seconds before the blast, sources said.

"The most scary part of the current probe is the discovery that the terrorists here are now trained in making bombs from stuff like fertilizers, available in the open market," the Pakistani intelligence official said.

A combination of fertilizer and fuel oil was detonated in the rental truck that exploded outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995. Campus radicals detonated a similar mixture outside the Army Math Research building at the University of Wisconsin in Madi-

son in 1970.

In another development, Pakistani authorities have arrested "senior" members of al-Qaida in Karachi, including a man identified only as "Riyad," according to a Pakistani intelligence official.

"Riyad's arrest was the most significant catch since Abu Zubaida's arrest in Faisalabad," the official said, referring to the joint FBI-Pakistani raid that captured the most senior aide to bin Laden since the Sept. 11 attacks.

Riyad and a second al-Qaida suspect were captured in a Pakistani police raid in Kharadar, a densely populated section of downtown Karachi. Two other al-Qaida suspects were taken into custody at the Karachi airport, the officials said.