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U.S. FURY ON 2 CONTINENTS: THE WEAPONS; Dozens of Ship-Launched Cruise Missiles Strike at Same Moment, 2,500 Miles Apart

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The United States attacked targets in Afghanistan and the Sudan with roughly 75 cruise missiles fired from Navy ships in the Arabian and Red Seas timed to strike their targets simultaneously, senior Administration and military officials said.

The missiles struck at precisely 1:30 P.M. Eastern time, more than 2,500 miles apart, after dark had settled in Afghanistan and as twilight waned in the Sudan, the officials said.

Most struck six separate targets within a sprawling camp near Khost, Afghanistan, which President Clinton called "one of the most active terrorist bases in the world." A smaller barrage struck a factory in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, that the Administration maintained produced important components for making chemical weapons, particularly VX nerve gas.

As the attack began, Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen ordered every American military base in the world to heighten its state of alert, increasing security in the event of retaliation from supporters of Osama bin Laden, the Saudi exile whom the United States accuses of sponsoring terrorism, including the embassy bombings in Africa this month.

As the missile attack was launched from a distance, there were no American casualties, the officials said. They said it was not immediately clear how much damage the strikes caused in Afghanistan and the Sudan, nor whether there were any casualties. Reports from Sudanese television in Khartoum depicted injuries there.

A senior military officer said the Pentagon was told less than an hour after the attacks that the cruise missiles had struck the factory in Khartoum, which the Sudanese Government said was a pharmaceutical plant. The Sudanese television images showed heavy damage, smoke and fire at the factory, described as Al Shifa Pharmaceutical Industries, in an industrial area northeast of the city center.

Military and intelligence officials said the extent of the damage in Afghanistan would not be clear until Friday at the earliest, but that the targets there included an array of buildings visible in satellite photographs shown at the Pentagon today.

Secretary Cohen and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Henry H. Shelton of the Army, declined to discuss details of the strikes, as did Mr. Clinton's other senior national security advisers. But Mr. Cohen said the raids would "reduce the ability of these terrorists organizations to train and equip their misguided followers or to acquire weapons of mass destruction for their use in campaigns of terror."

At the Pentagon, senior officials later said the United States timed the attack when it did because of "credible evidence" that there would be more than the usual number of suspected terrorists at the camps in Afghanistan. Mr. Cohen and other officials also said the attack was launched at night to minimize casualties among civilians, especially in Khartoum.

"Our plan was to attack these sites with sufficient power to certainly disrupt them and hopefully destroy them," Mr. Cohen said. "Some of these are solid structures; others are less so, but we believe that given the targeting that was done with the capability that was unleashed, it would cause sufficient damage to disrupt them for some time."

The strike today was the most significant military attack by the United States since September 1996, when the Pentagon carried out cruise-missile strikes in southern Iraq to punish President Saddam Hussein after an attack by Iraqi troops against the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq.

It was also the first hostilities for Mr. Cohen, who joined the Administration as its only Republican cabinet member in January 1997, and for General Shelton since he took over as the nation's senior military adviser last October. They were part of what the President's national security adviser, Samuel R. Berger, called "a small group" of aides that drafted the plans in extreme secrecy at a time of considerable tumult in Mr. Clinton's Presidency.

Plans for the strikes began early last week, but accelerated by last Friday as the Administration gathered what officials called strong evidence linking Mr. bin Laden's terrorist network to the bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and asserting that planning for additional terrorist attacks was underway, the officials.

American military action appears, for now, to be limited to the strikes today, but the President's senior advisers left open the possibility of additional action, especially if Mr. bin Laden's supporters retaliate. "This doesn't foreclose anything," Mr. Cohen said. "What we have prepared and have to be prepared for is a long continuing effort to deal with terrorism."

The United States already has a formidable array of forces in the region, the bulk of it devoted to keeping Iraq in check. And one

military official said the Pentagon did not have to increase its forces in the region to mount today's strike.

Although Mr. Clinton ordered a reduction from the peak levels reached during last winter's showdown with Mr. Hussein over weapons inspections, the United States still had more than 23,000 soldiers, 170 aircraft and 24 warships patrolling the Persian Gulf, led by the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln. Seven of those ships are fitted with Tomahawk cruise missiles, like those used in the attacks today.

The missiles, 18 feet long and costing nearly \$1 million each, can carry 1,000 pounds of explosives, fly 700 to 1,000 miles and, with sophisticated satellite guidance, strike their targets with remarkable precision.

Officials at the Pentagon were extremely reluctant to discuss where the cruise missiles were launched and from what ships. That, in part, reflected diplomatic sensitivities since the United States had to receive permission from Pakistan to send missiles over its territory.

However, the officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that two ships steamed to the Red Sea near the Sudan while others launched the attack from the Arabian Sea off Pakistan.

Officials said the factory in Khartoum had received financial support from Mr. bin Laden. The targets in Afghanistan were part of a camp called Zhawar Kili al-Badr, located near Khost in the lawless borderlands near Pakistan, which Mr. bin Laden has made his base of operations for the last two years.

General Shelton said that a number of terrorist groups are known to have trained recruits there. At any given time, he said, as many as 600 people stayed there.

The complex includes a headquarters, an arms depot and several areas devoted to training, including firing ranges. A senior Administration official described it as "a terrorist university."