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Pentagon Death Toll May Be 190

By Jim Wolf
WASHINGTON (Reuters) –

The Defense Department said on Thursday 126 people were still missing two days after a hijacked airliner slammed into the Pentagon, suggesting a possible death toll of about 190 at U.S. military headquarters, including the 64 people aboard the commandeered flight.

Officials said they were zeroing in on the aircraft's so-called black box, which could shed new light on the attack that punched a gaping hole in the huge, five-sided complex. "We have ideas where it is," Bob Blecksmith, special agent in charge of the FBI's Washington field office, told reporters touring the building's fire-scorched wedge. "That's obviously an important issue."

The first official tally of the missing was far lower than the worst-case scenario of up to 800 cited shortly after Tuesday's blitz by Fire Chief Ed Plaucher of Arlington County, Virginia, where the Pentagon is located. The highest-ranking victim appears to have been a three-star general who was the Army's personnel chief, a defense official said. The department said its tally was preliminary. If accurate, the final toll could be 190, including those aboard the American Airlines Boeing 757 seized by knife-wielding hijackers. All aboard the aircraft, seized after leaving nearby Dulles International Airport en route to Los Angeles, were presumed dead.

The attack on the nerve center of the world's mightiest military coincided with assaults that destroyed the World Trade Center's twin towers in Manhattan and with the crash in western Pennsylvania of another hijacked plane.

The Navy said its operations center -- likely to play a key role in any U.S. military response to what President George W. Bush has called "acts of war" against the United States -- had been damaged. "We have reestablished our operation center, and it is functioning," Adm. Vern Clark, the chief of naval operations, told a Pentagon briefing. He declined to say if it was still housed in the long, polished Pentagon corridors or had been moved elsewhere.

Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, Bush's choice to be the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said 20 percent or less of the building was out of commission. "There is a wedge taken out of the building," he told the Senate Armed Services Committee considering his nomination. "Roughly 20 percent of the square footage is out of commission."

Flames briefly leaped anew from the damaged portion of the Pentagon late on Thursday before being knocked down by firefighters. The flames, clearly visible to news crews at the scene, appeared to be extinguished by firefighters using hoses. A stubborn blaze that raged in the damaged portion of the massive building had been put out on Wednesday.

The plunging aircraft wrecked newly renovated offices deep into the Pentagon's five concentric rings but only part of the outermost corridor, known as the E Ring, collapsed completely. Recovery operations were hampered as workers used 20-foot-long oak plinths -- railroad ties -- to shore up huge slabs that threatened to cave in on them.

Defense officials said more than 60 bodies had so far been recovered. They were being sent to a military morgue at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, where forensic specialists worked to identify the remains.

NAVY NAMES ITS MISSING

The Navy named 42 missing -- including 33 uniformed personnel, five civilians and four people

working as contractors. Among the Navy's unaccounted-for were five people with the rank of commander, two captains, four electronic technicians and two chief information systems technicians.

The Army listed its missing as 21 military, 47 civilians and six contractors. Unlike the Navy, it did not immediately release their names or job titles. Also listed as missing were 10 unidentified people from unspecified Defense Department agencies.

The body recovery effort was interrupted for about two hours after a telephoned bomb threat prompted evacuation of search crews at about 7:30 a.m. (1130 GMT). A U.S. official said the FBI arrested a man shortly afterward but gave no details. The FBI declined to confirm or deny any arrests.

About half the 23,000 military personnel and civilian workers were at their desks on Thursday in undamaged parts of the complex, where the chief order of business appeared to be drawing up plans to retaliate.

In a video message to troops and other military personnel, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld commended staff for "how nobly and professionally" they responded to the attack. But, with the United States declaring the attacks an act of war and vowing to respond, he told them that "much, much more will be asked of you in the weeks and months ahead." "This is especially true of those who are in the field. We face powerful and terrible enemies -- enemies we intend to vanquish," he added.

A statement posted on the department Web site said: "The Pentagon returns to full operations on Thursday, Sept. 13. All personnel scheduled to work should report for duty."