

NOTICE ON APARTMENTS, HOTELS COMES IN BUSY SEASON

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Attorney General John Ashcroft's announcement yesterday that hotels, apartment buildings and other "lightly secured targets" might be attacked by the al-Qaeda terror network came during Tucson's biggest tourist event of the year, the Tucson Gem, Mineral and Fossil Showcase.

The Arizona Hotel and Lodging Association sent out a memo with a tip sheet from the Pima County Office of Emergency Management to all its members, which cover most properties in Tucson, said Bill Newman, southern Arizona director of the hotel association.

"All the major hotel and lodging companies in the area have internal corporate procedures they implemented not long after Sept. 11," Newman said.

Marci Rogers, director of sales at the Hilton Tucson East, said yesterday that the hotel's parent company, Interstate Hotels and Resorts, issued guidelines for how to deal with the threat, but that most of what the hotel is doing is behind the scenes.

"When Mr. Ashcroft makes his announcements, local (law enforcement) authorities take action. Police on a normal day make routine visits at hotels, but that is stepped up today (Friday)," though Rogers would not elaborate. "We are taking all the appropriate steps for our guests and don't want to go into additional detail."

Ashcroft told a Justice Department news conference that the decision was based on an increase in intelligence pointing to a possible attack by Osama bin Laden's organization timed to coincide with the hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, Islam's holiest site. The holy period begins Saturday and ends in mid-February, the same time the gem shows wrap up in Tucson.

Tens of thousands of pilgrims are traveling during the period before and after the five-day hajj, straining the ability of security officials to keep track of militants who might use the occasion to re-position themselves.

The change in the alert level will trigger a governmentwide increase in security precautions.

"We are not recommending that events be canceled," nor should people change their travel, work or recreational plans, Ashcroft said.

John Fannin, president and CEO of SafePlace Corp., an independent provider of safety accreditation for lodging, health-care, educational and other commercial buildings, said there are some things hotels and guests could do in light of the recent warnings.

"Hotels should be sure to know who's on your property and verify their identity with a government-issued ID," said Fannin, who has more than 30 years of experience in industrial security.

He also suggested that hotels increase security presence, especially when it comes to nonpublic areas.

"Limit access to the property, especially the back-of-the-house areas such as the kitchen and shipping and receiving," he said. "Look at anything that is out of character.

"You have a history with this event, so something unusual would likely stand out," he said.

As for guests, he suggested they, too, be observant and report anything they believe is unusual. He also suggested that they identify the nearest exit and fire exit and count the number of room doors between their room and the exit. This way, if there is a fire or limited visibility, they can feel their way out.

He also suggested that guests don't make it obvious there is nobody in their room by putting out "Maid service requested" or "Please make up this room" placards.

The Arizona Multihousing Association, which represents apartment complexes throughout the state, sent out notices yesterday about the new alert status to property managers.

The notice contained information on how to communicate with residents about the alert and guidelines on how to deal with housing unit inspections and contractors, among other subjects.

Kimberly Fitch, executive vice president of Schomac Property Management in Tucson, said apartment managers across the city have procedures for emergencies.

"Even if there's a bomb threat, they have certain procedures they have to go through," Fitch said. "A lot of companies have done emergency preparedness manuals."

She said that Tucson is probably less likely to be a terrorist target because it is not a major metropolitan area, but that the presence of nearby military bases means apartment managers should heed the alert.

Fitch said her management company, which has about 40 properties in southern Arizona, would likely send letters to residents to alert them to the heightened alert status.

"The last time we did it (in September) we did have a reaction from some people who thought we were being a little alarmist," Fitch said. "But what harm can it do to remind them (residents) to be aware?"