

Revealed: Ireland refused to allow bomb flights to land

Protests grow as more planes land at Prestwick en route to Israel

By Torcuil Crichton and Paul Hutcheon

Two US aircraft carrying bombs to Israel landed at Prestwick last night amid growing protests fuelled by the revelation that Ireland had ruled out allowing Shannon Airport to handle similar flights.

Dermot Ahern, the Irish foreign affairs minister, said he would block any attempt by the US to transport arms to Israel through his country.

A spokeswoman for Ahern told the Sunday Herald: 'Minister Ahern did say permission would not be granted if there was an application made to transport munitions of war to the Middle East.' Scottish opposition MPs yesterday described the use of Prestwick Airport to re-arm the Israeli offensive in Lebanon as 'completely unacceptable'.

The arrival of the flights yesterday came less than a day after George Bush apologised to Tony Blair over a procedural slip in the previous use of Prestwick to refuel two planes carrying bombs to Israel.

Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell said the flights this weekend were 'adding insult to injury'. He

added: 'What price the President's apology now? Who can tell if some of this equipment may be used to continue Israel's disproportionate attacks on Lebanon? The British government should be pursuing an active policy of denying weapons of any kind to anyone in the Middle East who may be assisting the conflict in any way.' The SNP's deputy Westminster leader, Angus Robertson, called on the Scottish Executive to make a stand although the Executive has no jurisdiction over as aviation matters are a Foreign Office responsibility and a motion expressing 'extreme concern' over the issue was lodged in the Scottish parliament by Glasgow MSP Sandra White.

'If these planes are carrying offensive weapons to be used by Israel it's completely unacceptable,' said Robertson. 'This shows Tony Blair has done nothing to stop these shipments in his discussions with President Bush.'

'After days of inaction, the Executive needs to make its voice heard to give Scotland military leadership in support a ceasefire in the Middle East.' The weapons are being supplied to Israel by the US in a bid to assassinate Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and other senior militia officials who may be hidden in tunnels in southern Lebanon.

A leading independent weapons expert has warned the weapons cargos pose a major risk to Prestwick Airport. 'These are the most horrendously powerful non-nuclear weapons on earth,' said Dai Williams, who has been investigating the new generation of hard target 'bunker buster' bombs.

'In the worst-case hazard assessment, an accident involving one of those flights would leave an unquenchable fire burning on the runway for a week and a large uranium cloud drifting over southern Scotland.' A demonstration led by Glasgow human rights lawyer Aamer Anwar is expected outside the gates of the airport today. Anwar says the Executive and Civil Aviation Authority are in clear breach of international law.

Prime Minister Tony Blair defended allowing the use of Prestwick Airport for the US aircraft ferrying bombs to Israel.

Speaking on an official visit to San Francisco he told Sky News: 'In relation to the issues at Prestwick Airport we should just apply the rules in the appropriate way, which is what we are doing.'

'What happens at Prestwick Airport is not going to determine whether we get a ceasefire in the Lebanon.'
