

4 Afghans dead as gunfight erupts

AP, Kabul

Thousands of people demonstrated in front of a local governor's office yesterday, demanding the release of a military commander arrested after a gunfight in which at least four Afghan fighters were killed, officials said.

Officials in the eastern city of Jalalabad, where the clash happened Thursday, claimed that three men died as US forces arrested Esmatullah Muabat, the military chief of nearby Laghman province, and that he was taken into US custody.

But Muabat's followers claimed the gunbattle was started by Hazrat Ali, Jalalabad's military leader, and disputed that Muabat was in US custody. They also claimed that seven of Ali's soldiers were killed in the clash.

The US military had no immediate comment on the incident in Jalalabad, about 60 miles east of the capital, Kabul.

On Friday, thousands of tribesmen protested in front of the governor's office in Mihtarlam, the capital of Laghman province, demanding Muabat's release, according to supporters of Muabat in the city.

The protesters blocked the road from Mihtarlam to Jalalabad, about 40km to the southwest, and were threatening to block the road from Jalalabad to Kabul unless their demands were met.

Agha Jan, a spokesman for Ali, said three men were killed in a gunbattle Thursday with US forces who arrested Muabat. Police chief Haji Ajab Shah said a fourth bodyguard died later in hospital and that two others were injured.



PHOTO: AFP
Former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto (L) holds a bunch of flowers as she arrives at the residence of India's Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani in New Delhi yesterday. Benazir who is in India for two-day visit, is scheduled to meet with India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and deliver a keynote address today at a conference entitled "Peace Dividend-Progress for India and South Asia".

HR Watch condemns hundreds of 'preventable' civilian deaths in Iraq

AFP, New York

Misguided military tactics by US-led coalition forces in Iraq resulted in hundreds of preventable civilian deaths, Human Rights Watch said in a report released yesterday.

The New York-based rights group specifically cited the use of cluster bombs and the US "decapitation" strategy -- targeted strikes on top Iraqi leaders -- as two major causes of unnecessary civilian fatalities.

"Coalition forces generally tried to avoid killing Iraqis who weren't taking part in combat," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. "But the deaths of hundreds of civilians still could have been prevented."

The 147-page report, titled "Off Target: The Conduct of the War and Civilian Casualties in Iraq," said more than 1,000 Iraqi civilians had been killed or wounded by the British and US use of nearly 13,000 cluster munitions, containing nearly two million sub-munitions.

In a single day, the report said, US cluster-munitions attacks in the southern Iraqi city of Hilla killed at least 33 civilians and injured 109.

A hospital director in Hilla told Human Rights Watch that cluster munitions caused 90 percent of the civilian injuries that his hospital treated during the war.

Hospital records from Hilla, Najaf and Nasariya recorded 2,279 civilian casualties in March and April, including 678 dead and 1,601 injured.

"The way cluster munitions were used in Iraq represents a big step backwards for the US military," said Roth.

"US ground forces need to learn the lesson that the air force seems to have adopted: cluster munitions cannot be used in populated areas without huge loss of civilian life," he added.

As for the "decapitation" tactic, the report said 50 strikes on top Iraqi leaders failed to kill any of the intended targets, but instead killed dozens of civilians.

The report cited an April 7 attack, apparently targeting Saddam Hussein on the basis of a satellite phone intercept, that killed 18 civilians and destroyed three homes in the Mansur neighborhood of Baghdad.

Residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch researchers said there was no evidence that Saddam or any members of his regime had been there.

"The decapitation strategy was an utter failure on military grounds, since it didn't kill a single Iraqi leader in 50 attempts," said Roth. "But it also failed on human rights grounds. It's no good using a precise weapon if the target hasn't been located precisely."

The report also documented violations of international humanitarian law by Iraqi forces, including use of human shields, abuse of the Red Cross and Red Crescent emblems, use of antipersonnel landmines, and placement of military objects in mosques and hospitals.

Iraqi protestors demand rights for prisoners

More attacks likely during Iraqi transition: Bremer

AFP, Baghdad

Families of Iraqis detained by the US authorities were among about 100 demonstrators in central Baghdad yesterday demanding rights for prisoners.

The organisers said the number of detainees could be as high as 18,000, although US forces have acknowledged only having more than 5,000. The figures are rising on repeated military sweeps against suspected coalition enemies.

"A lawyer is the most basic right," said one banner.

A woman whose three sons were arrested in October turned out with three other grandchildren.

Amal Salim Madi, 65, said she had had no news about her sons and that the family was without any income.

"The Americans said they were taking them off for an hour of questioning. We have not seen them since."

"Why can't I send or receive a letter?" asked another banner.

Amal's sister, Laman Salim Madi, said her two sons were taken in August. She too had heard nothing since.

Uzma Bashir, one of the protest organisers and part of Iraq Occupation Watch, which groups anti-war bodies around the world, said the US practices showed a "pattern of real brutality".

Gene Stoltz, an American with the Chicago-based "Christian Peacemaker Teams (Getting in the

Way)", said the attitude of the US authorities was "confusing".

"We try to see the prisoners, we follow case by case and sometimes we succeed." But he added that "the families are scared".

The group said Iraqi prisoners have been held for months by the coalition without legal defence, any contact with their families or any charges being brought.

Abu Gharib prison outside Baghdad holds some 10,000 Iraqi inmates, the Peacemaker Teams said, adding that detention centres have been built in most US bases in Iraq.

Since the International Committee of the Red Cross left Baghdad in October after a bomb hit their offices, prisoner visits have to be organised from Jordan and have thus become less frequent.

Meanwhile, more attacks can be expected during the next six months leading up to Iraq's independence and the US military response will be sharper, US civilian administrator Paul Bremer told The New York Times.

"We'll have bad days and good days," Bremer said in an interview published yesterday.

On the type of relationship the Iraqis and US military might strike up when a status of forces agreement is drawn up by March 15, Bremer said it would likely be based on security conditions in Iraq.

"It's a question that really ought to be asked in six months," he said.

"My own guess is we're going to have an increase in violence over the next six months."

As Iraq advances toward a democratic government and sovereignty, Bremer and US military commanders believe terrorists and people loyal to the fallen dictatorship of Saddam Hussein will step up their attacks on coalition forces.

"The violence will be precisely because of the fact that we're building momentum toward success," Bremer said.

Bremer was echoing a warning issued Sunday by top coalition commander in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez: "We expect to see an increase in violence as we move towards the transfer of sovereignty at the end of June."

The spike in violence, Bremer said, will be met by a sharper military response and an increased American investment in improving the daily lives of Iraqis.

"As we respond to attacks -- and we do have to respond to attacks to show that we mean to carry out our security obligations here -- we have to be careful that we don't overdo that," he said.

"We balance that by putting an enormous amount of money into reconstruction efforts," he said, adding that he wanted to double the estimated 100 million dollars already invested in projects in provinces under US control.

Sharon, Qorei may meet next week

Israel barrier will kill peace talks: Palestinian PM

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his Palestinian counterpart Ahmed Qorei were expected to meet next week, amid fears of renewed violence as seven religious Jews were wounded yesterday in a Palestinian attack at a West Bank holy site.

A major hurdle to the much-delayed summit between the two premiers was cleared when Qorei dropped any precondition, including one on the controversial construction by Israel of a separation barrier with the West Bank.

"They managed to convince prime minister Abu Alaa (Qorei's alias) to give up putting forward preconditions," Israeli Ambassador to Egypt Eli Sheked told reporters in Cairo, adding "it's an Egyptian contribution."

On Friday, the top-selling Israeli daily Yediot Aharonot published an interview with Qorei, in which he confirmed a meeting was on the cards for next week.

"I don't want to come out of the meeting with a picture," he told the

paper. "I want to come out with results. I want a positive message for both the Palestinians and the Israelis. I believe that the meeting will take place within days."

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom told public radio from Washington, where he is scheduled for talks with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, that he also expected the meeting for next week.

The meeting "will herald the resumption of talks which will enable us to know whether or not we have a real partner... who is ready for a negotiated solution putting an end to the conflict between us and the Palestinians," he said.

The first meeting between the two premiers since Qorei's new government was approved last month is aimed at putting the internationally drafted roadmap for peace back on track.

It is also hoped that it will consolidate a fragile period of calm on the ground, one of the longest since the start of the intifada despite the absence of an official truce.

On Friday, seven Israelis were injured in a pre-dawn attack at a holy

site in the West Bank city of Nablus, which is said to be the burial place of the biblical patriarch Joseph but whose access the army has banned to Jews for security reasons.

The headline Palestinian group Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the ambush, which it said was to avenge the deaths of six Palestinians during an Israeli raid into the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah on Thursday.

"This attack was a rapid answer to the massacre of our martyrs in the Rafah refugee camp," said a statement by the group's military wing, the Al-Quds Battalions, received by AFP in Gaza City.

The massive operation launched by the army near the Egyptian border was aimed at capturing a senior leader of the group and sparked accusations by the Palestinian Authority that Israel was trying to scupper peace efforts.

"We confirm our choice of military resistance," the statement said. "We will teach the Zionist enemy a painful lesson and will strike deep inside Israel."

Extremism poses threat to Pakistan, says Musharraf

Pak navy inducts Agosta submarine

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan faces no external threat, President Pervez Musharraf said yesterday, as he commissioned the country's first indigenously-built Agosta 90B submarine, in a sign of thawing tensions with India.

"We don't face any external threat," General Musharraf told some 1,000 armed forces' top brass, provincial officials and foreign diplomats at the submarine induction ceremony at navy dockyards in Arabian Sea port city Karachi.

Internal terrorism and extremism were instead the country's only threats, he said.

Musharraf's assertion of no threat from outside forces comes amid a slow process of normalisation between the nuclear powered arch-rivals.

Since facing off on the brink of war for most of last year, Pakistan and India have been mending ties this year, reviving ambassadorial and bus links severed by New Delhi over the December 2001

attack on its parliament.

Talks will be held next week on resuming a cross-border train service and flights will be restored from January 1.

Most significantly, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has agreed to travel to the Pakistani capital in January for the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc) summit.

No dates for formal talks, stalled since July 2001, have been set but observers are watching for possible chats on the sidelines of the Saarc summit.

Musharraf named instead terrorism and extremism as Pakistan's greatest threat.

"This is the only threat," he said. "Sectarian and religious terrorism is eating us like termites and it is Islam and the Muslim ummah (community) which is paying the highest cost. We all have to fight against it."

"The biggest internal challenge we are faced with is terrorism and extremism."

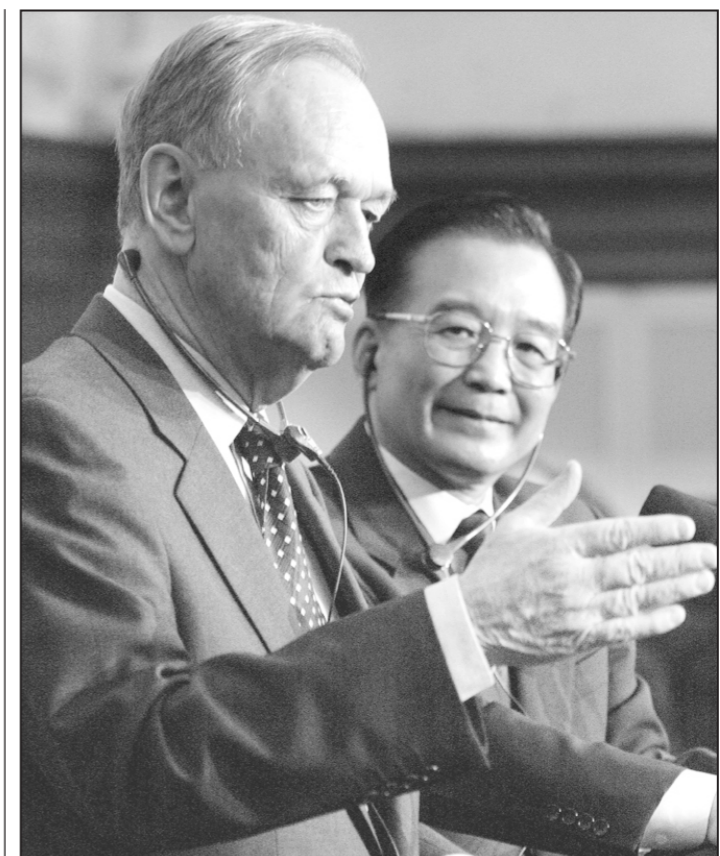


PHOTO: AFP
Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien (L) answers a question during a news conference as Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (R) watches Thursday in Ottawa, Canada. Chretien reaffirmed his country's support for Beijing's 'one China' policy after talks with Wen. It was Chretien's last day in office. He has resigned after 10 years in power.

Chretien ends decade as Canadian PM

AFP, Ottawa

Jean Chretien, one of Canada's longest-serving prime ministers and most successful Liberal Party leaders, resigned yesterday after a decade in office and handed over power to his longtime rival Paul Martin.

The departure of Chretien, who will be 70 next month, opens the way to a cabinet reshuffle with Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister John Manley the most senior departing member.

Martin is more conservative than the outgoing prime minister, and is expected to ditch or change some of his policies.

The only certainty appears to be that he is determined to retain the tight fiscal policies he stuck to as finance minister until June last year, when Chretien sacked him for too openly campaigning for the top job.

The makeup of the new cabinet is being kept secret until Martin and his ministers are sworn in by Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, but the transition team is reported to have interviewed about 100 of the Liberal Party's 170 members of parliament for ministerial posts.



PHOTO: AFP
An unidentified Indian peace activist, flashes a victory sign as he holds his luggage decorated with Pakistani and Indian flags, in Karachi yesterday. Some 260 people forming an Indian peace delegation have arrived in the southern port city to participate in a three-day peace conference, which is aimed at easing relations between the two South Asian neighbours.

EU to create military planning cell in '04

AFP, Brussels

European leaders approved yesterday plans presented by Britain, France and Germany to create an autonomous EU military planning cell early next year.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said the final accord fully met London's concerns about a potential overlap with NATO, a major bone of contention also for the United States.

"This gives us the opportunity to keep the transatlantic American alliance very strong, but making sure that in circumstances where America is not engaged in an operation, and where vital European

interests are involved, that Europe can act," Blair told reporters.

"That's exactly what we wanted, and doing it in a way that's completely consistent with NATO as the cornerstone of our alliance," he said.

The EU plans to set up a unit linking EU military officers, who would be responsible for planning and carrying out operations independent of NATO.

The unit will be based with the EU's already existing military staff in Brussels. A separate EU unit attached to SHAPE, the military headquarters of NATO in Mons, Belgium, would also be made permanent.

Flu outbreak widespread across US

AP, Las Vegas

With the flu now spread to all 50 states and nearly half of those considered hit hard, the government is scrambling to ship 100,000 vaccine doses to combat shortages, hoping to head off what could become one of the worst outbreaks in years.

The number of states with widespread infections nearly doubled to 24 in the past week, and the season has not yet peaked nationally, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday.

Worried parents are rushing to find shots even though many local health departments and doctor's offices are either out or about to run out of the vaccine.

Attack on Ivory Coast TV station: 12 killed

AFP, Abidjan

A gunbattle overnight near the offices of national television in Ivory Coast's main city of Abidjan left 12 people dead, the TV station director and military officials said yesterday.

Director Jean-Paul Dahily of state broadcaster RTI said the fighting broke out after gunmen tried to attack the television station.

The assailants were dressed in black clothes that had "ninjas" written on them, Dahily said in a radio interview referring to the

name of one of the many militias formed in Ivory Coast in the wake of last year's uprising against President Laurent Gbagbo.

Security was tight near the station, with nearby streets closed to traffic as bodies were being removed from the scene of the fighting.

Three bodies covered by plating sheeting were seen lying at an intersection near the television station.

Dahily said gunmen tried to attack the station but were rebuffed by security forces who shot dead 12 of them.