

Fierce fighting kills 36 in Afghanistan

AP, Kandahar

Fighting raged across southern Afghanistan yesterday with attacks on government offices and a police convoy killing a district chief and 14 others raising the death toll from two days of battles to 36, officials said.

Government officials said more than 200 rebels were fighting 250 police and Afghan soldiers, as well as US forces, making it the biggest battle this year in Afghanistan.

American war planes bombed suspected Taliban militants before dawn Saturday, killing eight of them, said Khan Mohammed, a police chief in Helmand province.

At the same time, militants attacked a government office in Helmand province's Musaqaala district, killing the government chief

and wounding four police, said Amir Mohammed Akhund, deputy governor of southern Helmand province.

Hours later, insurgents attacked the main government office in neighbouring Nauzad district, setting off a two-hour gunbattle that left one policeman and three suspected Taliban dead, he said.

Militants used a remote-controlled bomb to attack a police convoy in Kandahar, the main city in southern Afghanistan and a former Taliban stronghold, said Sher Mohammed, a police officer.

A district police chief in the convoy was unhurt, but a woman and a child who were walking in the area were killed, and three other passers-by were wounded, he said.

The toll from the initial fighting in Helmand on Friday rose to five police and 16 insurgents dead, and

16 police wounded, Akhund said.

Kandahar and Helmand are hotbeds of the anti-government insurgency and the drug trade, underlining the challenges that will face Nato peacekeepers from Britain and Canada who are set to deploy there later this year to take over from US forces.

Four years after the ouster of the hardline Taliban regime, its militant supporters are still fighting the US-backed central government, particularly in the volatile south and east of the country. Last year, more than 1,600 people died in the violence, the highest death toll since 2001.

Meanwhile, at least 33 people have died in the past week in severe weather in Afghanistan's northern Badkshan province, including 15 villagers who were killed in an avalanche, a provincial official said Friday.

Indian airport workers to continue strike

AFP, New Delhi

Indian airport workers vowed yesterday to continue their anti-privatisation strike which has created havoc in the nation's airports, ignoring an appeal by the prime minister to end the walkout.

"We have decided to continue with the strike," said M.K. Ghoshal, head of the New Delhi union branch representing the more than 22,000 workers employed by the state-run Airports Authority of India.

The decision by workers who handle cargo, baggage, cleaning and maintenance to continue the four-day strike came as passengers were greeted by mounds of litter at the Delhi and Mumbai airports, India's biggest and busiest terminals.

But reports quoting airline officials said flights were operating on time.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met representatives of the workers late Friday and promised there would be no job losses from the decision to privatise the New Delhi and Mumbai airports, union leaders said.



A daughter cries as her mother lies in a hospital bed following a stampede at a stadium in Manila yesterday. As many as 73 people were killed and many others injured in the Philippines stampede.

PHOTO: AFP

Nepal braces for strike after Maoist attacks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal braced yesterday for a week-long general strike called by Maoist rebels, a day after the guerrillas attacked a town near the border with India.

The Maoists have declared the nationwide strike starting Sunday in a bid to thwart local elections called by King Gyanendra who seized power a year ago.

Police reported no deaths or injuries in Nepalgunj after the Maoist attack late Friday, part of a stepped-up campaign of raids the rebels had vowed to stage in the lead-up to next Wednesday's municipal polls.

The town has a night curfew so residents were at home when the attack that lasted several hours began.

"There have not been any casualties," a police officer said, speaking on customary condition of anonymity, adding he had no more details.

The attack was the second big assault by the rebels in five days, after at least 15 people were killed when around 4,000 rebels stormed government buildings in Palpa district west of Kathmandu late Tuesday.

The royal government appealed to people to ignore the strike declared by the Maoists as part of their campaign to derail the polls, and threatened to arrest people who obstructed or vandalised traffic or tried to prevent shops opening.

"His majesty's government has made sufficient and reliable security arrangements in order to avert any untoward incidents and maintain normalcy," state-run news agency RSS, seen as a government mouthpiece, said.

The home ministry has told people to carry identification papers "to help the security forces presently involved in a strict security search," the agency added.

Palestinian govt must uphold roadmap: UN

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Friday said all members of a future Palestinian government must be committed to a negotiated settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Referring to the Islamic militant group Hamas, which scored a clear victory in the Palestinian polls last month, the 15-member council endorsed a statement stating that the future Palestinian government must be committed to the international roadmap for Middle East peace.

"The Security Council welcomes (Palestinian) President (Mahmud) Abbas' affirmation that the Palestinian Authority remains committed to the roadmap, previous agreements and obligations between the parties, and a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," the

statement said.

The text, read by this month's council president, US ambassador John Bolton, stressed that all members of a future Palestinian government must be committed "to the aforementioned instruments and principles."

It noted that major donors had indicated that they would review future aid to a new Palestinian Authority government "against that government's commitment to the principles of non-violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the roadmap."

The council also urged both Palestinians and Israelis to "avoid unilateral actions which prejudice final status issues," reminding them of "their obligation under the roadmap and on existing agreements including on movement and access."

West divided on free speech over cartoons

AFP, Paris

Muslim faithful vented their anger in mosques around the world on Friday over European cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM), as divisions opened up between Western countries over the limits to free speech.

Anti-European protests erupted in cities in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Europe, but there was also a sense of relief after millions of Muslims attended Friday prayers without a major outpouring of street violence.

Demonstrations were reported from Turkey, where protestors burnt French and Danish flags, to Indonesia, where around 100 men stormed the building of the Danish embassy, chanting "Let's go jihad (holy war), we're ready for jihad".

But the main focus of unrest was in the Palestinian territories, especially the West Bank city of Nablus where some 20,000 protestors burnt the flags of Denmark, France and Norway, where the offending sketches appeared in full.

US lawmakers seek intelligence report on North Korean nukes

AFP, Washington

US legislators asked President George W. Bush to declassify an intelligence report on North Korea's nuclear weapons so that Congress can hold a full debate on policy towards the Stalinist state.

The US intelligence community recently completed a comprehensive national intelligence estimate (NIE) of North Korea's nuclear weapons capability and long-range missile development programmes at the request of Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid.

On Friday Reid and three other senior Democratic senators requested Bush to provide "a declassified version of that NIE so that Congress can have at hand accurate information about the current threat and engage in a full and free debate about the best policy on North Korea going forward."

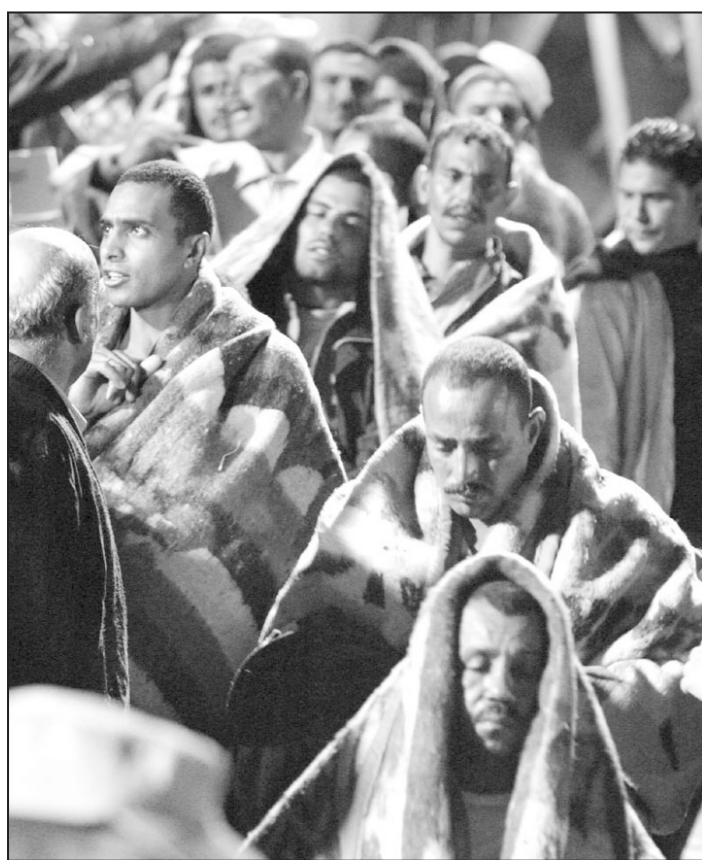


PHOTO: AFP

Survivors wrapped in blankets arrive at the port of the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Hurgahda yesterday. Rescue teams scoured the Red Sea for survivors after an Egyptian ferry sank, leaving more than 1,000 people dead or missing in one of the worst maritime tragedies in years as the rescued people spoke of a fire on board the ill-equipped vessel.

Angry relatives of ferry passengers storm Egypt port

AFP, Safaga

Hundreds of relatives of passengers from an Egyptian ferry that sank in the Red Sea broke through police cordons and stormed Safaga port Saturday amid mounting discontent over the lack of information on the fate of the missing.

The families of the more than 1,300 passengers who were on board the Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 when it sank around 0100 GMT on Friday had been waiting in an area usually dedicated to pilgrims on the edge of the southeastern port of Safaga.

An AFP reporter on the ground said that at least 300 of them muscled their way through several cordons of riot police to rush towards the docks in search of their loved ones, prompting a wild chase in the port area.

"Where is my father?", "Where is my son?", shouted people from the crowd as a high-ranking military official tried to appease them and promised to read out the names of

the survivors.

Search and rescue operations continued but hope of finding passengers who survived low night time temperatures was fast receding.

Egyptian public television announced that 324 survivors were pulled out of the Red Sea but only a few dozen were confirmed to have reached Safaga or the larger port of Hurgahda further north.

A police official in Safaga said late Friday that 185 bodies had been recovered.

Anger mounted among the hundreds of Egyptians, mainly poor families from rural areas whose relatives had sought better paid jobs in Gulf countries as President Hosni Mubarak reportedly prepared to visit Safaga.

Government employees could be seen hastily applying a fresh layer of paint on the town's pavements.

"They are too busy preparing the president's visit and they don't have time to care about our sons," said one angry Egyptian.

US unveils strategy for 'long war' on terror

AFP, Washington

The US Defence Department on Friday unveiled a new strategy to beef up US special operations forces for a "long war" on terrorism and develop new ways to combat weapons of mass destruction. The four-year strategy review also called for the development of more conventional high-tech weapons -- from long-range strike weapons to unmanned drones -- as a hedge against "strategic uncertainty."

Drafted as the United States fights the "war on terror" it declared after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the review reflects the Pentagon's view that future challenges are more likely to spring from adversaries like al-Qaeda than conventionally armed nations.

"This war requires the US military to adopt unconventional and indirect approaches," the so-called Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) said.

"Currently, Iraq and Afghanistan are crucial battlegrounds, but the struggle extends far beyond their

borders," it said.

"With its allies and partners, the United States must be prepared to wage this war in many locations simultaneously for some years to come."

However, the review called for no overall increases in the size of the ground forces, no cuts in large weapons programmes and no major change in the way the US military structures its forces.

"This is not a new beginning and not a culmination of transformation," said Ryan Henry, the Pentagon official who coordinated the review.

Instead, he said, "it is a snapshot in time along a continuum of transformation and one that's been reinforced by operational experience."

The US military will still be sized to fight two major military campaigns near simultaneously, and to win one decisively by toppling an enemy regime.

But it now must be prepared to fight a protracted irregular war like the one in Iraq, as well as another

major military campaign near simultaneously.

The QDR sets out four broad priorities: defeating terrorist networks, defending the United States, shaping the choices of countries at strategic crossroads, and combating the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

The report singled out China, Russia and India as among the "countries at a strategic crossroads."

Henry said the United States wants to be a partner in China's peaceful rise but also have the means to dissuade it from making the wrong choices.

"We think China should have a military capability sufficient to meet its genuine security needs," Henry said. "How that is translated depends on what sort of country (it becomes) and how China is going to be contributing to world stability."

The 2007 defence budget being submitted on Monday will include some funding requests inspired by the review.



PHOTO: AFP

Female convicts granted presidential amnesty to mark Sri Lanka's 58th anniversary of independence leave the main jail in the capital Colombo yesterday together with her young child. The country freed some 1,995 prisoners who were serving jail terms for minor offences.