

40 suspected al-Qaeda killed by Pakistani forces

AFP, Miranshah

Around 40 suspected Al-Qaeda militants, including a Chechen commander, were killed Wednesday when Pakistani troops backed by helicopter gunships struck their hideout near the Afghan border, officials said.

One soldier was killed and 15 wounded in fierce fighting after the army surrounded the sprawling compound in Saidgai village in North Waziristan, a few km from the border, a security official said.

"We have reports up to 40 militants, mainly foreigners, were killed in the raid on the compound where there was a big gathering of foreign militants," the official, who could not be identified, told AFP.

A local official identified the Chechen as Imam and said he was killed when he tried to escape during the raid.

He said 20 militants were also wounded in the operation which lasted for several hours.

The security official said the military action prompted retaliatory attacks by heavily armed militants on security forces positions in Miranshah.

Bush makes surprise visit to Afghanistan

Says Laden will be brought to justice

REUTERS, AFP, Bagram Air Base

US President George W. Bush made a surprise visit to Afghanistan on Wednesday to see for the first time the emerging democracy that replaced the Taliban ousted in 2001 after September 11.

Bush held talks with President Hamid Karzai and other officials of the US-backed government that took power after the Taliban regime was overthrown for refusing to hand over leaders of the al Qaeda network responsible for September 11.

Security was tight for what was expected to be a five-hour visit to Kabul and Bagram, the main base for US troops in Afghanistan.

A group of low-flying helicopters carried Bush and his entourage from Bagram across the dusty plain over mud brick homes to Kabul, where he was received by Karzai.

Later at a joint press conference, Bush hailed Afghanistan's progress

under President Hamid Karzai since the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

"We are impressed by the progress that your country is making Mr President, a lot of it has to do with your leadership," Bush told Karzai.

Karzai said that Afghanistan was indebted to the United States, which led the military operation that overthrew the hardline Taliban following the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington.

"We owe a great, great deal in this country's rebuilding peace, democracy -- strong steps towards the future -- to your support, to your leadership, to the American people," Karzai said.

Bush also said that he was confident Al-Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden would be brought to justice.

"I am confident he will be brought to justice," he told reporters at the joint press conference with Afghan President Hamid Karzai when

asked about the hunt for bin Laden.

"We have got US forces on the hunt for not only bin Laden but anybody who plots and plans with bin Laden," he said, adding that Afghan and Pakistani was also hunting the Al-Qaeda chief.

The US president was due to fly to India later as part of a tour that will also take him to Pakistan, another important ally in Bush's declared war on terrorism.

Bush is visiting Afghanistan at a time when the country is still troubled by a stubborn Taliban insurgency that has claimed 1,500 lives since the start of last year, including dozens of US soldiers.

US officials have portrayed Afghanistan as a relative success story compared to the US front in Iraq.

Millions of war refugees have returned to the country and presidential elections installed Karzai in October 2004 and the country's first

democratically elected parliament in September.

But more than four years after US troops toppled the Taliban, al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar remain at large.

US Lieutenant General Michael Maples, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, provided a stark assessment of the situation while speaking at a Senate hearing on Tuesday.

He said that insurgents represented a greater threat to the expansion of Afghan government authority than at any point since the Taliban's overthrow in late 2001.

He said the Taliban-dominated insurgency remained "capable and resilient" and would be active in the coming spring, having been emboldened by perceived tactical successes.



PHOTO: AFP
US President George W. Bush is escorted by Afghan President Hamid Karzai (R) on his way to inspect a Guard of Honour at the Presidential Palace in Kabul yesterday.

At least 23 killed in Baghdad car bomb attack

AFP, Baghdad

At least 23 people were killed and 58 wounded Wednesday in a car bomb attack in Baghdad's Jadida area, a mixed Shia-Sunni neighbourhood in the southeast of the Iraqi capital, an interior ministry official said.

The attack occurred on the main road of the neighbourhood which also housed a market at about midday (0900 GMT), the official added.

The attack is the latest in a series of bombings to rock Iraq, especially Baghdad, after 64 people died on Tuesday in similar bombings.

On Tuesday a car bomb had went off in the Jadida neighbourhood leaving many casualties.

US seeks funds to build prisons in Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

The US State Department is winding down its \$20 billion reconstruction program in Iraq and the only new rebuilding money in its latest budget request is for prisons, officials said on Tuesday.

State Department Iraq coordinator James Jeffrey told reporters he was asking Congress for \$100 million for prisons but no other big building projects were in the pipeline for the department's 2006 supplemental and 2007 budget requests for Iraq, which total just over \$4 billion.

"This is the one bit of construction we will be doing -- \$100 million for additional bed capacity for the Iraq legal system," he said.

Eventually, the Iraqis would take more detainees now in US custody and more space was needed, Jeffrey said, adding that money would also be set aside to increase the number of prosecutors and "corrections advisers."

UK's cocaine use 'as high as US'

BBC NEWS ONLINE

The level of cocaine use in the UK is as high as in the US, a new report on international drug use has suggested. The International Narcotics Control Board's (INCB) annual report said 2% of the UK's population used cocaine.

The report also found the UK had one of Europe's highest rates of cannabis use, alongside the Czech Republic, France, Ireland and Switzerland, in 2005.

The INCB's chief, Professor Hamid Ghodse, said downgrading of cannabis had been a mistake.

Saddam trial resumes but lead lawyer absent

AFP, Baghdad

The trial of Saddam Hussein and seven aides on charges of crimes against humanity resumed Wednesday with all the defence lawyers attending the session, except Saddam's lead lawyer Khalil al-Dulaimi.

The accused, all dressed in traditional clothes except Saddam who wore a crisp, black suit, came to the court and sat down quietly, an AFP correspondent reported.

The hearing came amid fears of fresh outbreak of communal bloodshed in Iraq after two bombs left eight killed in Baghdad, a day after a spate of bombings left 64 dead.

Iraqi prosecutors on Tuesday submitted to the court trying Saddam what they said was an execution order signed by the former Iraqi dictator, as his lawyers stormed out of the tribunal.

A few minutes after the new

session began, chief prosecutor Jaafar al-Mussawi detailed the documents again but was interrupted by Barzan al-Tikriti, Saddam's half-brother.

"The prosecutor should stop referring to the people killed in Dujail as victims as the case is not proved yet," Barzan retorted.

Documents were presented linking Saddam to the trial and execution of 148 villagers from Dujail, north of Baghdad, in some of the most significant documentary evidence to have been presented by the prosecution so far.

Saddam's lead lawyers, Dulaimi and Khamis Ubaydi, had walked out of the courtroom at the start of Tuesday's hearing after the judge rejected their pleas for proceedings to be postponed and for the judge and chief prosecutor to be dismissed for alleged bias against the accused.

Mubarak warns US against hitting Iran

REUTERS, Cairo

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said he had advised the United States against attacking Iran, predicting that Tehran would react through its influence over Shi'ite Muslim communities in Arab countries in the Gulf.

In remarks to Egyptian newspaper editors published on Wednesday, Mubarak also said an Israeli attack on Iran was most unlikely because Tehran would respond by launching ballistic missiles at the Jewish state.

The United States has declined to rule out military force against Iran, which it says it suspects of working on nuclear weapons under the cover of its civilian nuclear program.

Mubarak, speaking on his way back from the Gulf on Monday, said he discussed the consequences of a US attack on Iran with US Vice President

Dick Cheney, who visited Egypt in January.

"I said to him word for word: 'Listen to my advice for once,'" Mubarak said, speaking the phrase in English. The remark was published in the state-owned daily al-Gomhuria.

Mubarak warned against the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. "If an air strike (against Iran) took place, Iraq will turn into terror-

ist groups more than it is already ... The Gulf area has Shi'ite majorities in many of the states and America is linked to vital interests in this area and has naval facilities," Mubarak said.

"Iran spends generously on the Shi'a in every country and these people are prepared to do anything if Iran is hit."

The newspaper continued: "The president said that he ruled out completely

Israel carrying out this strike (on Iran) because Iran possesses ballistic missiles which it would launch at Israel and which would cause great damage.

"Violent revenge would appear from Iraqi groups and extremist religious parties and organizations like Hizbollah and so on ... Such a strike would turn the whole world, especially for the Americans, into a big theater for terrorism."

Mubarak visited five Gulf countries -- Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates -- on Sunday and Monday, a few days after talks in Cairo with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

He said he was surprised at media speculation that his mission was to convey US demands to Gulf leaders.

Palestinian militant chief assassinated

AFP, Gaza City

The military leader of Islamic Jihad, the radical Palestinian faction behind all the suicide attacks against Israel in the past year, was assassinated Wednesday in an Israeli air strike in Gaza.

Khaled al-Dahduh, also known by his nom-de-guerre Abu al-Walid, was killed instantly when the vehicle in which he was travelling exploded in a ball of flames in Gaza City, medics and witnesses said.

Dahduh, the overall leader of the Al-Quds Brigades armed wing, was the most high-profile victim of Israel's policy of so-called targeted killings since the larger Islamist group Hamas won a Palestinian general election five weeks ago.

News of his death emerged as an Israeli working at a service station near a Jewish settlement in the northern West Bank was fatally wounded in a drive-by Palestinian shooting. The radical Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades claimed the attack.

The latest deaths bring to 4,970 the number of people killed since the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in 2000. Most of the victims have been Palestinian.

While Hamas has halted its campaign of attacks in the past year, Jihad has carried out half a dozen

suicide bombings inside Israel and decided to snub the democratic process.

Both groups are classified as terrorist organisations by Israel and their members are liable for arrest for activities on their behalf.

In a sign that Hamas's entry into mainstream politics has not altered their status in the eyes of the Israeli authorities, two newly-elected MPs for the radical faction were arrested in annexed east Jerusalem on Wednesday.

Police spokesman Shmuel Ben Rubi said that Mohammed Abu Teir and Mohammed Totah were detained while touring Al-Maqassid hospital on the Mount of Olives and campaigning for new Hamas members.

"They are not allowed to do any political activities in Jerusalem," he said.

A Hamas source said Abu Teir and Totah were arrested as they toured the Makassid hospital as part of an inspection of institutions in east Jerusalem.

Since the 1967 Middle East war, Israel has occupied and annexed east Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want to make the capital of their future state.

Ahmadinejad to visit Kuala Lumpur amid nuclear furore

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrives on a visit to seek Malaysia's support for his country's controversial nuclear programme, analysts and diplomats said.

The three-day trip, during which he will brief Malaysia's leaders on Iran's nuclear capabilities, comes amid feverish efforts to avoid having the issue referred to the United Nations Security Council.

Ahmadinejad will be accompanied by Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki who is on a global tour to explain Tehran's position and drum up support ahead of a March 6 meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The 35 member states on the UN nuclear watchdog's board of governors will discuss a recent report which found question marks over Iran's program, and could refer Iran to the Security Council for potential economic sanctions.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian relatives of Khaled al-Dahduh grieve as they hear the news of his death at the al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City yesterday. The leader of the armed wing of the radical Islamic Jihad faction al-Dahduh, was killed in the Israeli air strike on a car in Gaza City, Palestinian medical sources said. Dahduh, was the leader of the Al-Quds Brigades in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.