

10 GIs killed as US chopper crashes in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

A US helicopter involved in an anti-Taliban combat operation crashed in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, killing all 10 US soldiers on board, the US military said yesterday.

The crash of the Chinook in Kunar province late Friday was another blow to coalition forces in Afghanistan after a bomb killed two Italian soldiers near the capital the same day.

"The remains of 10 soldiers were on board the aircraft that crashed last night. There were no survivors," said a spokeswoman for the US-led military coalition, Lieutenant Tamara Lawrence.

Lawrence said all the soldiers killed in the crash in eastern Kunar province were American. Details of

the dead would be released by the Pentagon, she said.

Some 15 other US soldiers have already died in Afghanistan this year, 13 of them in hostile action. Four died on March 12 when a roadside bomb ripped through their convoy in Kunar.

Friday's toll was the biggest in one incident since Taliban militants shot down another US Chinook helicopter in Kunar in June last year, killing all 16 soldiers on board, eight of them US Navy SEALs.

Two months before that a US military helicopter crashed in bad weather in the southeast of the country, killing all 18 Americans on board, including 15 service members in the worst helicopter crash during operations in Afghanistan.

The US-led coalition said the chopper that crashed on Friday was

not brought down by enemy action, rejecting a claim by Taliban insurgents that they had shot it down.

"The crash occurred in a very mountainous terrain and the landing zone was very difficult. It was a mountain-top landing zone," Lawrence said.

"There were various weather factors that could have come into play... there were high winds. We are investigating any possible causes for the accident but there were no enemy actions detected at the scene."

Afghan President Hamid Karzai said in a statement he was saddened by the deaths.

"The people of Afghanistan will never forget the sacrifices made by the US soldiers for the sake of peace and prosperity of the people of Afghanistan," he said in a statement.

The aircraft was taking part in a massive anti-Taliban drive, Operation Mountain Lion, launched in insurgency-hit Kunar last month. It crashed near the provincial capital Asadabad close to the border with Pakistan.

Mountain Lion is one of the biggest operations in months against insurgents loyal to the Taliban regime. It involves 2,500 Afghan and coalition troops backed by a range of US and British war planes.

While the 20,000-soldier US-led coalition is battling Taliban and other insurgents in eastern and southern Afghanistan, a separate NATO-led force of peacekeepers is deployed in the west and north, and the capital Kabul.



PHOTO: AFP

TV grab from Sky News taken yesterday shows people attacking British armoured vehicles as British soldiers extinguish a fire following the crash of a British helicopter in central Basra. At least four British servicemen were killed when their helicopter crashed in flames into the centre of Iraq's second city of Basra after being struck by an insurgent rocket.

India blisters in heat wave

Sunstroke kills 33

AFP, New Delhi

At least 27 people have died of sunstroke in India's eastern Orissa state, a state official said, taking the heat-related death toll in India to 33 as temperatures soared yesterday.

"We are in a position to confirm 27 deaths at the moment," Manmohan Samal, the state's revenue minister, told AFP Saturday.

Orissa officials said the actual death toll could be as high as 38 since the onset of the hot weather mid-April, with daytime temperatures in the state hovering at 42 degrees Celsius (108 degrees Fahrenheit).

Sunstroke killed five people overnight in northern Uttar Pradesh state, where the temperature in the crowded city of Jhansi hit 46 degrees Celsius (114.8 degrees Fahrenheit) on Friday, the Press Trust of India said.

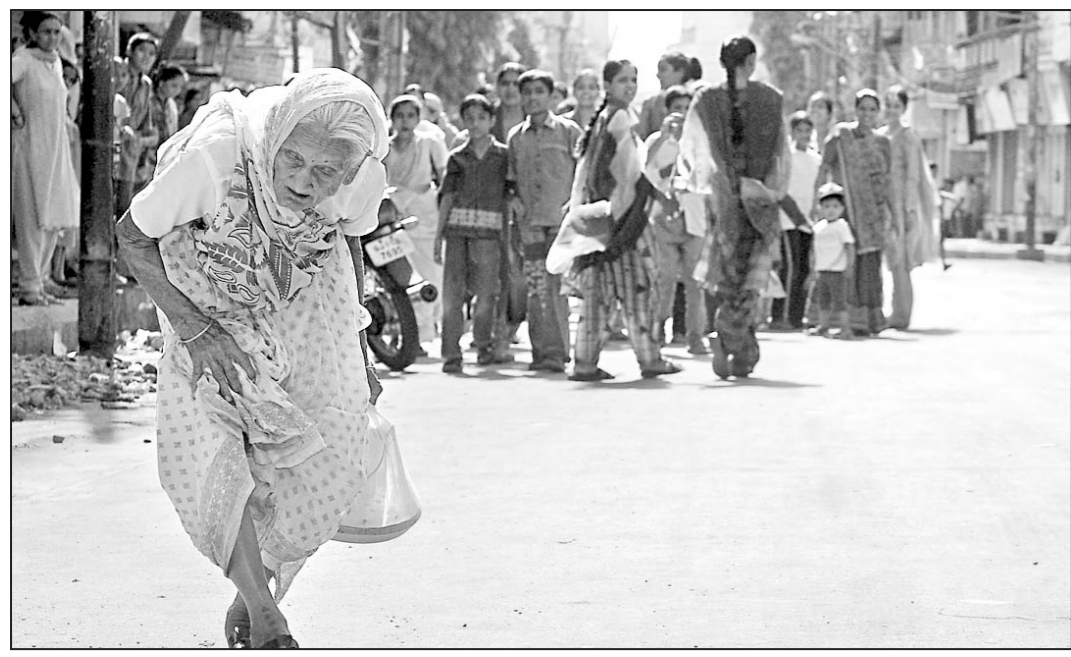


PHOTO: AFP

Laximiben (95) walks through the Paani Gate area of Vadodra Friday during the three hours of relaxation of the curfew for women only. India's Supreme Court banned the western state of Gujarat from razing mosques in a city where a municipal drive to clear congested areas triggered sectarian violence that left six people dead.

Violence out of control in Lanka: Monitors

AFP, Colombo

A Japanese peace envoy was to arrive in Sri Lanka for talks Saturday as Scandinavian monitors said violence between government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels was out of control.

Tokyo's special peace envoy Yasushi Akashi was to hold talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse and would also try to meet leaders of the Tamil Tigers during his four-day visit, the Japanese embassy said.

Despite a four-year-old ceasefire, more than 200 people have died over the last month in tit-for-tat attacks by government and rebel forces, who are fighting for a Tamil minority homeland.

"The escalation of violence that's occurring now is completely out of control," Helen Olafsdottir, spokeswoman for the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission that oversees a four-year-old truce, told AFP.

"There's anarchy on the ground." In the latest action on Friday, government forces attacked several rebel Tamil Tiger boats off the island's northwest, destroying one vessel and a truck transporting reinforcements, the military said.

One naval craft sustained damage from Tamil Tiger fire but there were no casualties among sailors, said defence ministry spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe.

The navy hit back and sunk a Tiger craft, he said.

Tigers had planned to fire on the navy with truck-mounted guns but a helicopter gunship was called in to destroy the guns, the navy said. There was no independent confirmation of whether the air strike was successful.

The fighting occurred after naval craft had confronted at least four boats of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) near Kuthirimalai Point off the coastal district of Mannar, the military said.

Also on Friday, three soldiers were wounded in a Claymore fragmentation mine attack near the main railway station at Vavuniya, 260km north of Colombo, Samarasinghe said.

A policeman died in a similar mine attack at Nellyyadi in Jaffna on Friday, police said.

Akashi's visit comes as the government was seeking international pressure to revive talks with the rebels on saving the ceasefire, which is tenuously holding despite the rising violence.

CIA chief Goss quits

REUTERS, Washington

CIA chief Porter Goss, assigned to rebuild the US spy agency after the twin intelligence breakdowns of September 11 and Iraq, quit under pressure on Friday after less than two years on the job.

President George W. Bush gave no explanation for the move, which a senior administration official said Bush had been discussing with Goss' boss, national intelligence director John Negroponte, for the last few weeks.

Administration officials told CNN on Friday that Air Force Gen. Michael Hayden, principal deputy director of national intelligence, would replace Goss. Sources also told The New York Times and Time magazine Web sites that Hayden was a leading candidate for the post.

Goss has come under fire inside and outside the agency during a difficult tenure.

Senior administration officials told The Washington Post that Bush decided to replace Goss months ago. Negroponte met with Goss last month and told him to prepare to leave by May, the newspaper reported on its Web site, quoting officials with knowledge of the conversation.

APPEARANCE AFTER POWER TRANSFER

Nepal king worships power goddess

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's humbled King Gyanendra used his first public appearance since restoring democracy to sacrifice animals and offer prayers to the Hindu goddess of power, officials and local media said yesterday.

The 58-year-old monarch, accompanied by Queen Komal, made a quiet visit on Friday to the shrine of Dakshinkali, about 25 km south of Kathmandu, a palace official said.

The king, who gave in to last month's street protests and reinstated the parliament dissolved in 2002, offered prayers to the "family deity" in a ceremony marked every year on the eighth day after the half-moon day in the Nepali month of Baisakh (mid-April to mid-May), he said.

"This is a very important worship of the family or personal deity," said Mukunda Raj Aryal, an expert on Nepal's Hindu culture. "The family deity is the most important of all gods and is worshipped on all auspicious occasions."

The monarch offered prayers for more than 90 minutes at the shrine located in a forested ravine and sacrificed a goat, a lamb, a buffalo, a rooster and a duck to the deity, the Kathmandu Post daily said.

It said more than 300 soldiers and policemen kept a vigil along the route and around the temple but the usual rush of people to cheer the monarch was conspicuous by its absence.

It is common for Hindus in Nepal, the world's only Hindu kingdom, to sacrifice animals to Dakshinkali, considered the goddess of power.

For centuries, Nepali Hindus considered the king as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the god of protection and one of the sacred Hindu trinity of supreme gods that also includes Brahma and Shiva.

But King Gyanendra's popularity dipped after he sacked the government and took over absolute power early last year.

Blair under pressure to go

AFP, London

Tony Blair, Britain's embattled prime minister, was facing growing pressure yesterday to announce when he plans to resign even as the dust settled on his most dramatic cabinet reshuffle since taking office.

Blair, who was celebrating his 53rd birthday Saturday, has pledged to step down before the end of his third term, which is due to expire by May 2010 at the latest, but has so far resisted calls to set an exact date.

This may change, however, as a letter is reportedly circulating

around MPs in the governing Labour Party warning the prime minister to lay out his succession plans or face a leadership challenge.

The letter has already attracted some 50 signatures and The Guardian newspaper said that lawmakers plan to publish it, possibly by the end of next week, if Blair fails to comply.

The developments came after the prime minister sacked his home secretary, demoted his foreign secretary, took powers off his deputy and juggled other key ministerial posts in a dramatic cabinet reshuffle

on Friday.

The move was aimed at injecting new life into the scandal-hit government.

But critics say it will take more than hiring and firing largely the same group of ministers to regain the confidence of voters, who dealt the Labour Party a painful blow in local election across England on Thursday.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Brown, the man seen as most likely to replace Blair, admitted the results were a "warning shot" from a frustrated electorate.

Bush says fight against terror is 'World War III'

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush Friday said the September 11 revolt of passengers against their hijackers on board Flight 93 had struck the first blow of "World War III".

In an interview with the financial news network CNBC, Bush said he had yet to see the recently released film of the uprising, a dramatic portrayal of events on the United Airlines plane before it crashed in a Pennsylvania field.

But he said he agreed with the description of David Beamer, whose son Todd died in the crash, who in a Wall Street Journal commentary last month called it "our first successful counter-attack in our homeland in this new global war - World War III".

Bush said: "I believe that I believe that it was the first counter-attack to World War III."

"It was, it was unbelievably heroic of those folks on the airplane to recognise the danger and save lives," he said.

'Stillborn' Indian infant comes alive just before burial

AFP, New Delhi

A baby declared stillborn by Indian doctors started to move his limbs and cry just before his father was to bury him, the infant's uncle said yesterday.

Doctors at a leading city hospital had told rickshaw driver Rakesh Babbar that his wife had given birth to a stillborn baby Friday.

"Rakesh had taken the child to the burial ground where they removed bandages from his face for the rites. Then the baby started crying," the child's uncle Ashok Kumar Vohra told AFP.

"The family is now very happy." He said the family had filed a charges against Safdarjung Hospital which had set up a panel to investigate the lapse.

Authorities at the government hospital declined to comment. Vohra said the staff had handed over the child to the father, all wrapped up in clothes and bearing a tag that declared it stillborn.

He said the baby was born prematurely after seven months and was now in an intensive care unit at the hospital.