

Afghan fighting rages

GI, 2 French troops, 25 militants killed

AP, AFP, Kandahar

Suspected Taliban rebels ambushed two Afghan army convoys and US forces in the country's south, sparking gunbattles that killed at least 25 militants, five Afghan soldiers and a US soldier, coalition forces said yesterday.

Six American soldiers also were wounded. The latest bloodletting comes just days after a 24-hour storm of violence across Afghanistan killed some 120 people. The fighting was among the heaviest since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001 and has raised fears for this country's future.

Two French commandos were killed and a third was wounded in combat on Saturday in Afghanistan, a French military source told AFP.

"Two French special forces soldiers were killed and one wounded in Afghanistan during fierce fighting on Saturday morning," the source said on condition of anonymity.

He did not say how or where the

soldiers were killed.

The fiercest fighting erupted late Friday in Helmand province, the country's main opium poppy growing region, where drug profits are believed to fund the insurgency. Six militants and an Afghan soldier were killed, said Gen. Rehmatullah Raufi, the head of the Afghan military's southern region.

It then continued into Saturday morning, with rebels ambushing a large army convoy, setting off a shootout that left 15 Taliban and four Afghan soldiers dead, an army commander said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Hundreds of reinforcements were deployed to the area and the rebels fled on motorbikes and foot, he said.

Defence Ministry spokesman Gen. Zahir Azimi confirmed that four soldiers had been killed, and he said 20 rebels were either dead or wounded.

Militants ambushed another army convoy in Zabul province

Saturday, and four fighters were killed as the troops returned fire, Raufi said.

In the western city of Herat, meanwhile, an explosion ripped through a vehicle carrying former warlord Amanullah Khan, wounding him, said Gulam Sarwar Haydari, the city's deputy police chief. It was not immediately clear what caused the blast.

The US soldier was killed in southern Uruzgan province Friday, the coalition said. The six wounded soldiers were in stable condition.

In the past year, Uruzgan has been the site of some of the heaviest fighting in Afghanistan, but militants suffered high losses in multiple battles with coalition forces, and the violence there has subsided in recent months.

At least 235 members of the US military have died in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan as a result of the invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, according to the US Defence Department.

Palestinian intelligence chief injured in blast

AFP, Gaza City

The head of the Palestinian intelligence services was seriously injured and his bodyguard killed in a blast yesterday at the services' Gaza headquarters, raising fears of a burst of internecine violence.

Tareq Abu Rajab, the overall head of the intelligence services, was together with several of his bodyguards in an elevator when an explosion ripped through the building in Gaza City.

Abu Rajab's bodyguard, Ali Abu Hassira, who was Abu Rajab's nephew, died of his wounds shortly after the blast, and at least eight other people, most of them bodyguards, were wounded in the apparent assassination attempt.

"One person, Ali Abu Hassira was killed, and eight others were wounded including two in serious condition," Baker Abu Safia, the head of the emergency service at the Shifa hospital in Gaza City said.

"Rajab has been seriously injured, but his life was not in danger," Abu Safia added.



PHOTO: AFP

Outgoing Iraqi prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari (L) shakes hands with Iraq's new Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki (C) and also acting interior minister during the presentation of the new government to the Iraqi parliament in Baghdad yesterday. Maliki called on Iraqis to denounce terrorism and to come together in a spirit of love and tolerance. He was speaking to parliament, after it endorsed him and the 37-member cabinet he presented that lacked the defence and interior ministers so crucial to pacifying the violence-racked country.

Typhoon kills 104 in Asia

REUTERS, Hanoi

A typhoon that raked the South China Sea has killed at least 104 people, and Vietnamese officials said yesterday that more than 160 fishermen were still missing and feared dead.

Typhoon Chanchu, the strongest on record to enter the South China Sea in May, the start of the storm season, left a trail of destruction through China, Vietnam and the Philippines.

It killed at least 37 people in the Philippines last weekend. By late Friday, bodies of 44 Vietnamese fishermen were found by Vietnamese and Taiwanese rescuers after Chanchu, the Chinese word for "pearl," moved west briefly before changing course to head north, sweeping away dozens of Vietnam's ships in its path.

The typhoon, with winds up to 170 km per hour (106 miles per hour), killed 23 people in China after it slammed into the southern coast on Thursday and moved north where it weakened.

In Vietnam five fishing ships sank off the central city of Danang with 122 crew members, and rescuers have found 20 bodies and rescued 30 others, said Tran Van Huy, director of the city's Fisheries Department.

UN envoy meets Suu Kyi

AP, Yangon

The UN's top political official met yesterday with detained Myanmar pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been barred from meeting foreigners for more than two years, sources close to Myanmar officials said.

The two met at a government guesthouse where visiting UN Undersecretary-General for Political Affairs Ibrahim Gambari was staying, according to the sources, who demanded anonymity for fear of reprisals. Gambari arrived in Myanmar on Thursday to press the ruling military junta to restore democracy and cease human rights violations.

The visit is the first in more than two years by a high-level UN representative. The last foreigner to see Nobel Peace Prize laureate Suu Kyi was UN special envoy Razali Ismail, who saw her in March 2004.

Residents near Suu Kyi's villa on Yangon's University Avenue said they saw a black vehicle with tinted windows leave the compound and soon afterward pull into the guesthouse, located near her residence.

Earlier Saturday, Gambari held talks with the leader of the

military junta, Senior Gen. Than Shwe, on human rights and prospects for restoring democracy.

The United Nations has been one of the louder voices calling for democratic reforms in Myanmar and the junta has responded by barring UN special envoys from the country. Razali resigned from his job as special envoy to Myanmar in frustration shortly after his 2004 visit.

Gambari flew to the country's new administrative capital, Naypyidaw, 250 miles north of Yangon, for the meeting with Than Shwe.

Other top junta leaders, including Gen. Maung Aye and Prime Minister Soe Win, attended the one-hour meeting, but details were not immediately available.

Gambari earlier met with other senior government officials and a representative of Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy.

The party had asked Gambari to request a meeting with Suu Kyi when he met the junta chief, stressing that Suu Kyi must be included in any dialogue process.

Suu Kyi has been detained for about 10 of the last 17 years, mostly under house arrest.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian student helps a colleague tie a blackband during a protest rally in Bangalore yesterday. Students of various medical and engineering colleges organised the rally to protest against the government's recommendation to make a 50 percent reservation for backward classes in the education sector and government jobs.

Norway fears isolation over Lanka peace role

New firing across de facto front lines

AFP, Oslo/ Colombo

The European Union's decision to place the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on its list of terrorist organisations risks isolating Norway, which has played a key role in the nation's peace process, chief negotiator Erik Solheim said on Friday.

Norway, which is not an EU member, has mediated talks between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil separatists since 2000.

Under pressure from the United States, the 25 EU members on Thursday agreed, from next week and at the latest "before June", to place the LTTE on its list of terrorist organisations.

The move will notably allow greater scrutiny of funds transferred to the rebel group.

"It certainly means that Norway may become even more isolated in the Sri Lankan peace process, since we will be one of the few countries able to deal completely impartially with both Sri Lankan authorities and the Tamil Tigers," Solheim told Norwegian national radio NRK.

In fresh violence, Sri Lankan government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels traded artillery fire across a de facto front line in the island's north yesterday, military officials said.

There were no immediate reports of casualties on either side after a 30-minute exchange of fire at Muhamalai in the Jaffna peninsula, but the main entry and exit points in the area were briefly shut, officials said.

Nepal names negotiator for talks with Maoists

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has named a senior minister to hold preliminary talks with the Maoists to prepare for a direct meeting between rebel chief Prachanda and Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, a minister said yesterday.

The multi-party government, formed after King Gyanendra bowed to massive protests and handed power back to political parties, has appointed Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula to head a three-member team, he said.

"Other members of the team will be named soon," Works and Physical Planning Minister Gopal Man Shrestha told Reuters.

"There will also be a separate multi-party party team to assist the government negotiators," he said.

The Maoists, who have been fighting to topple the monarchy and set up a communist state in Nepal, have named their spokesman,

Krishna Bahadur Mahara, for the preparatory talks.

Officials said the meeting, the first in nearly three years, would begin soon.

"These will be only preliminary talks," Shrestha said. "There will be a higher-level team headed by the prime minister for the talks with Prachanda."

Early this month the government matched a rebel ceasefire and the two sides agreed to meet.

Preparations are also going ahead to hold elections for an assembly to draft a new constitution and decide the future of the monarchy.

This week, the parliament reinstated by Gyanendra stripped him of various powers and took away his control over the army.

The administration is now called the Nepal government instead of "His Majesty's Government", and the army's "Royal" tag has been dropped.