

Two soldiers, 48 Taliban killed in Afghan battle

AFP, Kabul

Two coalition soldiers and up to 48 rebels have been killed in southern Afghanistan where the biggest anti-Taliban operation since the hardliners were ousted in 2001 is under way, the military said Sunday.

The fighting erupted during the day Saturday in a Taliban hotbed in Panjwayi district of Kandahar province and lasted into the night, an Afghan commander said.

The Afghan army said that 48 Taliban rebels were killed and five arrested; the coalition put the toll at 45.

That brought to almost 200 the number of insurgents killed as part of Operation Mountain Thrust over the past two weeks. The Afghan

defence ministry had put the toll for that period at 149 on Saturday.

Two soldiers with the US-led coalition died in hospital after being badly wounded in the clash, the force said in a statement. Another was hurt. Their nationalities were not released.

Forty-three coalition soldiers have now died in combat in Afghanistan this year, around half of them Americans.

Panjwayi district is only 35 kilometres (22 miles) southwest of the south's biggest city Kandahar, which has been hit by regular attacks including Iraq-style suicide blasts.

The fugitive leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammad Omar, lived in the area for a while and is reputed to have first assembled the movement's religious

scholars into a fighting force there in 1994 to rescue two girls abducted and raped by regional warlords.

Two years later the Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan and imposed a harsh version of Islamic Sharia law on the population which included public stoning to death for adultery. They also sheltered the Al-Qaeda terror network.

The hardliners were removed from power in late 2001 by a US-led coalition after they failed to hand over Al-Qaeda leaders following the September 11, 2001 strikes on US cities.

Panjwayi has seen some of the fiercest fighting in the past month, with the Taliban and security forces mounting some of their biggest attacks since 2001.

The clashes have killed dozens

of Taliban but also 34 civilians who were caught up in a coalition strike in Panjwayi last month.

Saturday's battle started when a joint Afghan and coalition force initially engaged eight to 10 "enemy extremists," the coalition said.

"The enemy fighters attempted to flee the area but then joined other reinforcements in a nearby compound."

"Afghan and coalition forces pressed the attack with joint fire and a ground assault, killing an estimated 45 extremists in the firefight."

The coalition has said Operation Mountain Thrust is intended to "set the conditions" for a NATO-led force's takeover in late July of command of the southern region from a US-led coalition.

Iran warns of using oil as weapon

AFP, Tehran

Iran's oil minister has warned that the country would use oil as a weapon if its interests are attacked, state television reported Sunday.

"If the country's interests are attacked, we will use all our capabilities and oil is one of them," Kazem Vaziri-Hamaneh said on Saturday, the television reported.

Iran is currently locked in a standoff with the international community over its nuclear program, facing the threat of sanctions if it does not accept a US-backed offer and halt sensitive nuclear work.

Vaziri-Hamaneh warned about impact any sanctions on Iran would have in the oil market, saying the price of crude, currently around 70 dollars a barrel, risked going up to 100 dollars.

"The world needs energy and understands the affect of oil sanctions against Iran on the market and no-one will make such an unreasonable decision," he added.

The West fears Iran, which is OPEC's number two oil exporter, is secretly trying to build nuclear weapons, a charge denied by Tehran which insists its atomic program is purely for electricity-generation.

Sri Lankan president for direct deal with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president is bypassing peace broker Norway to seek a deal with Tamil Tiger guerrillas which halts weeks of killings in return for keeping a breakaway rebel faction in check, reports said Sunday.

President Mahinda Rajapakse contacted the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) through a Tamil-language newspaper editor, the pro-opposition paper Sunday Leader reported, saying that he had asked for a two-week truce with the rebels.

"Both the LTTE and the army are preparing for war and the people and I are caught in the middle. We don't have to work through Norway, why don't we deal directly?" the president was quoted as saying by the paper.

There was no immediate comment from Rajapakse's office, but official sources said the president had made contact with a Tamil newspaper editor last week in a bid to halt the daily death toll reported from embattled regions.

Rajapakse's reported peace bid comes amid an upsurge in violence that has seen more than 800 people killed since December and threatens to derail a ceasefire signed in 2002.

Scandinavians monitoring the truce have said that the ceasefire, signed in 2002, is only on paper.

Norway, which has failed to bring the two sides together for talks, is expected to meet Thursday with other truce observers to decide the future of a ceasefire monitoring mission, known by its acronym SLMM.

The Tigers have thrown the SLMM into crisis by demanding the removal of monitors from European Union nations Finland, Denmark and Sweden after the EU branded the Tigers a terrorist group last month.

Part of Rajapakse's offer, according to the reports, is a pledge to contain a renegade rebel commander in the island's east, V. Muralitharan, who is better known as Colonel Karuna.

Tehran stands firm on uranium enrichment

AFP, Tehran

Iran repeated on Sunday that it will not suspend uranium enrichment as a precondition for talks on its disputed nuclear program, state television reported.

"The suspension of enrichment is one step backward. We think Europe should negotiate without preconditions... which only cloud the negotiating atmosphere," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters.

"Instead of setting preconditions that are both unreasonable and baseless, we should negoti-

ate," he added.

On June 6 Iran was presented with an international proposal promising incentives and multilateral talks if it agrees to temporarily halt uranium enrichment activities -- at the heart of fears the headline regime could develop nuclear weapons.

Iran's nuclear negotiators insist that the work is to provide fuel for nuclear energy only, and that Tehran will not call a halt to it.

On Saturday Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said in Berlin Tehran was "very seriously studying" the package offered by the five permanent UN

Security Council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany to resolve the crisis over its nuclear ambitions peacefully.

Speaking after meeting his German counterpart, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Mottaki said he saw "very positive points" in the proposal but also "ambiguities".

Germany is part of the so-called EU-3 along with Britain and France which has been working for more than two years to try to resolve the Iran nuclear crisis and, most recently, broker consensus on the issue with the US, China and Russia.

Taliban abduct three health workers

AFP, Jalalabad

Taliban insurgents in northeastern Afghanistan have abducted a provincial health officer and two health workers, including one with a Swedish group, police and the rebels said Sunday.

A Taliban religious council will decide on the fate of the three who were kidnapped in Nuristan province Saturday because they worked for the government, a Taliban spokesman said.

There have been a host of similar abductions of people allied with the government and many of them have been killed.

Provincial health director Hazrat Khan and the two others were snatched after returning from the inauguration of a clinic in Kamdush district bordering Pakistan, district police chief Taj Gull said.

He said one of the health workers was employed by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, a non-governmental organisation working mainly in the fields of education, health and disability.

The group could not immediately be reached for confirmation.

A purported spokesman for the extremist Taliban movement, Mohammad Hanif, said the group was responsible.

"We abducted them since they were working for the government and were loyal to government," he said by satellite phone from an undisclosed place.

"They have been taken to secret location. The Taliban religious council will decide on their fate," Hanif said.

Nuristan province has seen relatively few of the Taliban attacks that occur almost daily in southern and southeastern Afghanistan as the headline movement tries to claw its way back into government, from which it was removed in 2001.

But four US soldiers were killed and one was wounded in clashes with militants in Kamdush on June 21.



Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (L) waves at crowd during the convention of Workers Party in Brasilia on Saturday where he accepted his nomination for a second term in October polls.

Wen clinches raft of deals during African tour

AFP, Beijing

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao returned to Beijing Sunday after clinching a raft of agreements during his seven-nation African tour to shop for resources for his fast-growing Asian country.

Wen arrived back in China Sunday morning after concluding his whirlwind official visits to Egypt, Ghana, the Republic of Congo, Angola, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda, Xinhua news agency reported.

Wen's trip -- the third high-level Chinese diplomatic visit to Africa in less than six months -- follows visits earlier this year by Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing and President Hu Jintao, who clinched important oil exploration deals in several states.

The tour to the world's poorest continent has aroused concern that Beijing's diplomatic offensive was aimed at countering the United States and sparked criticism that China's hunt for natural resources was in disregard of human rights.

Wen rejected those criticisms and stressed that China followed a policy of non-interference in other countries' affairs.

Instead, he talked optimistically of a new strategic partnership with Africa which would enhance political equality and mutual trust as well as promoting economic and political ties.

"The Chinese government, guided by the principle of sincerity, friendship, equality, mutual bene-

fit and common development, is committed to building a new type of strategic partnership with Africa," Wen said in South Africa.

Trade between China and Africa reached around 40 billion dollars in 2005, a rise of 35 percent from a year earlier and almost four times higher than in 2001.

In addition, China has given 5.5 billion dollars in assistance to Africa, sent 16,000 health workers to 43 different countries on the continent and reduced or cancelled the debt of 31 nations over the past 50 years.

It has also promised steps to expand economic and trade ties and help Africa by offering zero-tariff treatment for some exports and increased aid and debt relief, while at the same time helping to build infrastructure.

In Wen's last stop, Uganda, agreements signed include economic and technical cooperation, energy and infrastructure, mining, textiles, oil exploration and tourism.

E Timor minister quits to protest at Alkatari

AFP, Dili

East Timor's foreign and defence minister Jose Ramos-Horta resigned Sunday in protest at embattled Prime Minister Mari Alkatari, a senior official said.

"He has resigned from the government," Agio Perreira, spokesman for President Xanana Gusmao, told AFP.

Asked why Ramos-Horta had decided to step down, Perreira said the minister had blamed Alkatari, adding only: "You had better ask him directly."

A soldier from the multinational forces patrolling Dili posted outside the gates of Ramos-Horta's home confirmed he had resigned but said more details would not be released on Sunday.

Ramos-Horta is a Nobel peace prize winner and was the international face of East Timor's struggle for independence from Indonesia.

His resignation at 5:00 pm (0800 GMT) came as leaders of the ruling Fretilin party hunkered down for a special meeting during which they are expected to decide the fate of Alkatari.

The president had demanded last week that Alkatari step down to take responsibility for a crisis which has gripped the nation for weeks but he was rebuffed when the party rallied behind the premier.



A young boy with a painted face joins a protest rally in Dili on Saturday against East Timor's embattled prime minister Mari Alkatari.

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