

# Chopper crash kills 16 in Afghanistan

## 22 Taliban die in fighting

AP, Kabul

Fighting in southern Afghanistan killed 22 suspected Taliban militants, officials said Wednesday, as Nato nations approved expanding the alliance's peacekeeping force into the region.

On Thursday, officials said a civilian helicopter crashed in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, killing all 16 people on board, including at least two American civilians.

Afghan army and US-led coalition troops have recovered 12

bodies and were searching for four more in the difficult, mountainous terrain where the civilian Mi-8 helicopter crashed on Wednesday, Col. Tom Collins, a coalition spokesman told reporters.

The Russian-made civilian helicopter crashed about 25 miles northeast of Khost city.

Collins said there was no indication yet what caused the crash. He said those on board included at least two Americans. The Dutch military has said two of its personnel were also on board.

Meanwhile, the top UN envoy in Afghanistan, Tom Koenigs, said a Taliban insurgency in five provinces of southern Afghanistan is being fueled by international terrorist networks, foreign money and a porous border which the Pakistani government does not control.

"We face a Taliban movement which has apparently recovered and has to be answered by a series of measures, political and military, in cooperation with the Afghan government," he told reporters after briefing the UN Security Council in

New York.

Taliban fighters have stepped up attacks this year, triggering the worst violence since the hard-line regime was ousted in 2001 for hosting Osama bin Laden. The bloodshed has raised new fears for Afghanistan's fragile democracy.

The latest clashes, involving Afghan and US-led coalition troops and air power, occurred Tuesday and Wednesday in two districts of Helmand province, also the hub of Afghanistan's huge trade in opium and heroin.

## No F-16s to Pakistan without security vow

Says Rice

REUTERS, Washington

Pakistan must provide written security assurances as part of a deal for \$5.1 billion in American-made F-16 fighter jets and no equipment will be transferred until anti-diversion protections are in place, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has promised Congress.

Aiming to ease lawmakers' concerns over the weapons package offered to a key American ally in the war on terror, Rice said in a letter obtained by Reuters on Wednesday that before the first aircraft is delivered, Pakistan will sign a document that details Islamabad's security commitments.

In addition, "no aircraft or munitions will be delivered until US officials have determined that all security measures are in place" and Congress has been briefed on those procedures, she said.



PHOTO: AFP  
Indian left-wing activists shout slogans and carry placards as they march to the Israeli embassy in New Delhi yesterday to protest the continued bombing of Lebanon by Israel. Hundreds of activists from India's left-wing parties protested near the embassy to demand that Israel soldiers stop killing the people of Lebanon and Palestine.

## Lankan jets bomb LTTE airfield

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan warplanes bombed a clandestine airfield being built by Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday, the second day of bombardment against the guerrillas, the defence ministry said.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had cleared a jungle patch just north of the district of Trincomalee and were building an airfield when the planes carried out the attack, the ministry said in a statement.

"The operation was conducted to prevent the construction of this unauthorised air facility, which poses a grave security threat not only to the sovereignty of Sri Lanka but the entire region," the statement said.

The bombardment was the second against the LTTE in two days.

"The bombing raids were over the northeastern region," a military official said, adding that three jets were used in the offensive just

north of the same area where warplanes staged three similar sorties Wednesday.

Kfir jets pounded suspected rebel bases Wednesday at Maavilaru and Hirugalaru in north-eastern Trincomalee district where the army said the separatists had blocked an irrigation canal.

The LTTE said that the military had carried out two days of bombings in which two civilians were wounded and two homes were destroyed.

"The air strikes disrupted the plans that were being taken to address the Maavilaru water supply issue," the Tigers said, referring to allegations that they had blocked water to some 1,500 farmers in the region.

Policy Planning Minister Keheliya Rambukwella, the government spokesman on defence issues, said Wednesday's raids were aimed at supporting ground troops escorting irrigation engineers sent to open sluice gates closed by the Tigers.

## Nepali Maoist rebels extend truce

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels say they will extend a three-month-old ceasefire with the government that is due to end this week, but accused the ruling coalition of failing to push the pace of peace talks.

"The extension of the ceasefire will be announced before it expires," said Krishna Bahadur Mahara, who has led the rebels in talks with the multi-party government, which came to power after King Gyanendra gave up his absolute rule in April.

The rebels had declared their truce in late April, which was soon matched by an unilateral ceasefire by the government. The truce ends at midnight (1815 GMT) on Friday.

The comments by Mahara came as a United Nations mission was due to arrive in the Nepali capital later on Thursday to assess ways of helping the peace process.

The Maoists, who backed violent street protests that forced

the monarch to cede power, are demanding an immediate dissolution of the reinstated parliament and the formation of an interim government that would include them.

The interim government would then supervise elections next year for a special assembly to decide the future political set up of the Himalayan nation -- including the fate of the monarchy.

But Mahara said the government was dragging its feet on implementing the political roadmap agreed in November last year between the rebels and the seven-party alliance.

"Political parties in the government are divided between those who want progressive changes in the country and those who want the status quo," Mahara said.

"Real democracy has not come to Nepal yet as political parties made a compromise with the king," he added, referring to government leaders who favour a ceremonial role for the king.

## US Senate backs extending sanctions on Myanmar

AFP, Washington

The US Senate on Wednesday voted to extend economic sanctions against the government of Myanmar for three years for what lawmakers decried as the ruling regime's lamentable human rights record.

The Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act, which passed by a voice vote, was first passed by the Senate in 2003 and has been renewed every year since then, but so far, to little effect, Senate lawmakers conceded.

"Tragically, Burma's human rights record has worsened, rather than improved, in the three years since Congress enacted the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act," said Democrat Max Baucus, a supporter of the legislation.

Baucus listed a litany of complaints, which underscore why the regime merits an extension of sanctions.

"Earlier this year, the detention of (politician and human rights activist) Aung Sang Suu Kyi was extended for another year. More than 1,100 political prisoners languish in jail in Burma (Myanmar), prevented from expressing their aspirations for a democratic government," Baucus said.

## Troops breaking truce, says Naga rebels

REUTERS, Diphupar

Naga rebels, fighting for a separate tribal homeland, said on Wednesday they were running out of patience as government forces had killed dozens of their cadres in violation of a 1997 truce.

The comments by a top rebel leader came before peace talks with Indian government ministers in Bangkok later this week and the expiry of the ceasefire, due on July 31.

The rebels of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, Isaac-Muivah faction (NSCN I-M), have stepped up pressure in the run up to the talks, saying sovereignty was the key issue.

"They have killed around 116 of our boys in cold blood and arrested about 200 of them in the recent past," Phunthing Shimray, a NSCN (IM) "brigadier" who heads the rebels' ceasefire monitoring cell, told Reuters.