

200 Taliban killed in major Nato offensive

3 Canadian soldiers also slain in fighting

AFP, Kabul

Around 200 insurgents were killed in the first two days of a major anti-Taliban operation under way in southern Afghanistan, a Nato military source said yesterday.

The International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) was undertaking battle damage assessments of the operation launched in southern Kandahar province on Saturday, an official said.

However, "over 200 Taliban were killed in the last two days," the source said on condition of anonymity.

"Activities are still continuing. We are trying to get a reasonable estimate of battle damage."

Three Canadian troops were killed Sunday in a major operation under way in southern Afghanistan, the defence ministry said.

British forces were meanwhile preparing to repatriate the remains of 14 soldiers killed when their plane crashed Saturday, the first day of Operation Medusa, which involves

about 2,000 Afghan and Nato military personnel.

"We had air strikes yesterday. Today we launched our ground offensive and we met the enemy. Three Canadians were killed and six others were wounded," defence ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi said.

The new deaths would take to 18 the number of Canadian soldiers killed in enemy action this year; 30 have been killed since Canadian forces deployed to Afghanistan in 2002, months after the ousting of the Taliban government.

The Canadian military would only say that soldiers with Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) were "killed and wounded" in fighting around Panjwayi district, the focus of the operation.

"It was part of Operation Medusa which is ongoing," Lieutenant Commander Kris Phillips told AFP.

Major Luke Knittig at the ISAF headquarters in Kabul said the force had taken multiple casualties.

Hours after Medusa was launched Saturday, a British reconnaissance plane despatched from Qatar and carrying out surveillance of the operation area crashed in the Panjwayi area, killing all 14 soldiers on board.

Isaf has dismissed a claim by the Taliban that they had shot down the Nimrod MR2 spy plane, saying the crash was caused by a technical problem. "It was flying far too high when the crew reported a problem," it said.

The crew had been trying to ensure civilian casualties were avoided in Medusa, an Isaf spokesman in Kandahar city told AFP.

The remains of the British soldiers were due to be transported from the crash site to the Kandahar Air Field Sunday before being repatriated to Britain, Major Quentin Innis told AFP.

The crash caused the biggest single loss of British troops in Afghanistan or Iraq since the US-led "war on terror" was launched in November 2001.

The US Air Force sent helicopters and unmanned spy planes to the search and recovery operation, it said in a summary of daily activities.

US, British and French aircraft also bombed and destroyed Taliban targets in the area of Kandahar on Saturday, it said, while Isaf air power was also called into operations in Helmand and Khost provinces.

Medusa is the biggest offensive in the south since Isaf took command of the south from a US-led coalition on July 31.

It is aimed at driving out insurgents in Panjwayi, about 35km west of Kandahar, Afghanistan's second-largest city.

The Taliban emerged from the area as an armed force in the early 1990s, first capturing Kandahar and then sweeping to power in 1996 before being ousted five years later for sheltering al-Qaeda after the September 11 attacks.



Pakistani commuters make their way through floodwaters during a heavy downpour in Lahore Saturday. One person was killed and eleven others were injured in building collapse incidents in the provincial metropolis as rain continued for a second consecutive day in Lahore, the capital of Punjab province.



Indian farmer Kirtpal Singh (R) along with others show their rain-ruined crops following two days of almost incessant rains at the village of Bai Kalan, some 15km from Amritsar in India's northwestern state of Punjab. Crucial rains for the country's farm-dependent economy have flooded and ruined hectares of fields in India's northwest.

Floods make 1.5 million homeless in Orissa

Kashmir put on alert

REUTERS, Bhubaneswar

Flooding triggered by monsoon rains in the past few days has left 1.5 million people homeless and damaged thousands of acres of paddy crop in Orissa, officials said yesterday.

Over 20,000 people were evacuated after hundreds of villages were cut off. Army troops were evacuating more villagers from coastal districts with the authorities braced for more rain.

"We are bothered about the fresh formation of a low pressure over the Bay of Bengal and are closely monitoring its movement," Subash Pani, the state's senior-most bureaucrat, told Reuters.

The flood victims, with their houses submerged, were living in makeshift tents and surviving on dry food air-dropped by relief workers, witnesses said.

Hundreds of people are killed every year in South Asia during the June-September monsoon season and millions displaced from their homes or marooned in their villages.

Monsoon rains have caused widespread damage this year.

Hundreds of people have been killed in western and southern India and millions left homeless due to flooding. At least 140 people have been killed and thousands left homeless in Rajasthan in the past two weeks.

In Nepal, at least 50 people died last week in flash floods. Thousands of people have been evacuated to dry areas while officials are braced for any outbreak of diseases.

Landslides and flash floods have also affected thousands of people in Pakistan.

In Orissa, continuous rains and flash floods in the past three months have already killed 70 people and crippled road and electricity networks, officials said.

In restive Indian Kashmir, authorities declared a flood alert on Sunday after the Himalayan region's main rivers flowed above the danger mark, flooding villages and damaging crops.

Palestinians to form unity govt in 10 days

Says Abbas

AFP, Gaza City

A Palestinian national unity government will be announced within 10 days, a spokesman for president Mahmud Abbas said Saturday following weeks of wrangling between his Fatah party and the ruling Hamas movement.

"Meetings between president Mahmud Abbas and Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, including some which took place today, have been productive and positive," Nabil Abu Rudeina said.

"We expect to announce a national unity government in the coming 10 days."

Abbas has been meeting with Hamas leaders in Gaza since Wednesday in the latest round of

talks aimed at forging a unity government.

Hamas heads the current cabinet since its landslide election win in January but has seen crippling aid cuts to the already cash-strapped Palestinian Authority over its refusal to recognise Israel or renounce violence.

Government spokesman Ghazi Hamad said "we will announce the creation of national union government as soon as possible," adding that talks with Abbas have been "serious."

The leader of the Hamas faction in parliament, Khail al-Haya, nevertheless denied that a union government could be announced within 10 days, saying the negotiations "were still at an early stage."

Israel could release 800 Palestinians for hostage soldier

AFP, Jerusalem

Under secret talks being brokered by Egypt, Israel could release up to 800 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for a soldier captured by Gaza militants in early June, a report said yesterday. Quoting unnamed security officials, top-selling daily Yediot Aharonot said Israel would free the prisoners in three stages and that the negotiations were being held up over the timetable of the releases.

Israel has refused as part of the deal to release Marwan Barghout, a leader of the Palestinian uprising and a top official of president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah faction, it said.

Gaza militants seized Corporal Gilad Shalit in a June 25 cross-border raid that left two other soldiers dead, sparking a large-scale Israeli offensive in the coastal strip to recover the serviceman and prevent rocket fire.

The continuing offensive has killed more than 200 Palestinians.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya of the ruling Islamist Hamas movement told reporters Sunday: "The Egyptians are making a lot of efforts. There are certain things going on to solve this question but there is nothing specific."

"We hope the Egyptian efforts succeed," he said during a visit to a school in Gaza.

Pro-Taliban militants ink peace deal with Pakistan

AP, AFP, Miran Shah

Pro-Taliban militants encouraged by tribal elders signed an agreement with Pakistan's government Saturday to ensure "permanent peace" in this volatile northwestern tribal region near the Afghan border, intelligence officials said.

Under the agreement, which is likely to be unveiled by the government next week, no militant will attack government officials or security forces. In return the army deployed in North Waziristan "will not carry out operations against them," an area intelligence official said.

The official said "the Taliban have also agreed to distance themselves from foreign militants."

A second area intelligence official said the accord was signed at a seminary near Miran Shah, the main town in North Waziristan

where the military has carried out several operations against militants in recent years.

Both intelligence officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to discuss the issue with the media.

Pakistan's Interior Minister Aftab Khan Sherpao was not available for comment. Fakhar-e-Alam, the top government administrator in North Waziristan, who reportedly was present when the accord was signed also could not be contacted as his staff said he was busy in a meeting with tribal elders.

Residents welcomed the ceasefire and urged the government to take steps for lasting peace.

Pakistan is a key ally of the United States in its war on terror and it has asked the militants to lay down arms, evict foreigners from their

areas and refrain from crossing the Afghan border to attack coalition forces.

Militants in the past have demanded the release of their associates arrested after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks in the United States and have asked the government to abolish military checkpoints in North Waziristan.

Pakistan has deployed more than 80,000 troops in the country's tribal regions bordering Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, are believed to be hiding.

Meanwhile, Tribal insurgents bombed a gas pipeline in southwestern Pakistan yesterday as tension continued over the killing of a rebel chieftain in a military operation, police said.

Lanka fighting hits lull

Phone lines up, aid sent in

AFP, Colombo

A lull in fighting yesterday between Sri Lankan troops and Tamil rebels near a strategic port allowed mobile phone lines in the area to be restored and aid supplies to be rushed in, residents said.

The period of calm around the restive northeastern district of Trincomalee came a day after 110 combatants were reported killed or missing in a sea battle off Jaffna, a peninsula hundreds of miles to the north.

"There is relative quiet in Trincomalee and our mobile phones are working again after weeks," a local resident said by telephone.

Mobile networks had been blocked by the government during weeks of artillery exchanges around the port town to prevent the rebels using them to better target their

attacks.

Military officials said Sunday that a ground offensive to capture a rebel artillery position at Sampur 10km away that targeted the port complex had been called off because of stiff rebel resistance.

Meanwhile, a second cargo ship was due to leave the capital Sunday with supplies of food and medicine for desperate residents of the embattled Jaffna peninsula, the site of a six-hour sea battle on Saturday.

A cargo ship from the capital

arrived last week in Jaffna following the end of a two-week siege imposed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that also blocked shipping from the main supply base of Trincomalee.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website said at least 30 Sri Lankan sailors were missing following the rebel counter attack that also damaged two Israeli-built gunboats. The military said 80 rebels were killed.

Blair's ministers do the dirty work to prove they are 'in touch'

AFP, London

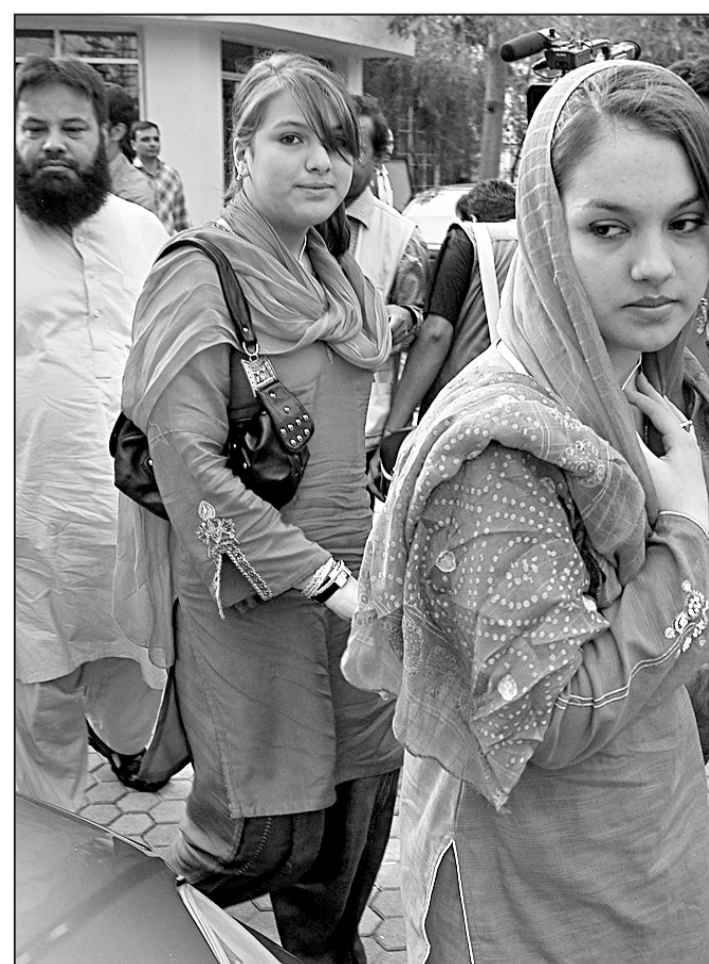
British government ministers are hurling themselves into filming video diaries of them doing everyday jobs to show they are "in touch" with ordinary workers, The Sunday Times newspaper reported.

Clean-cut Environment Minister David Miliband will get his hands dirty at a recycling plant, Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain will do a hands-on job in a steering wheel factory and Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell will attempt to help underprivileged children.

The weekly newspaper said it was the brainwave idea of Hazel Blears, the chairman of Prime Minister Tony Blair's governing Labour Party, to provide some light relief at what is expected to be a turbulent annual conference later this month.

Ministers were said to be keen to prove their "in touch" credentials, with Jowell apparently relishing the challenge.

An unnamed culture department source told The Sunday Times: "She's been doing it all week. She's scarcely been in the office. If Tessa's example is anything to go by, they are throwing themselves at it enthusiastically. The aim was to get most of the cabinet involved."



British teenager Molly Campbell (C) is flanked by her father Sajad Ahmad Rana (L) and sister Tahmina (R) as they leave a press conference in Lahore yesterday. A Pakistani court has issued an interim custody order in favour of Rana for his daughter Molly Campbell whose Muslim name is Misbah Iram Ahmad Rana and has sent a notice to mother Louise Campbell to appear personally after the end of interim period on September 6.

Scientists begin human tests on 'bionic eye'

AFP, Sydney

Australian researchers developing a "bionic eye" say early tests have succeeded in stimulating limited visual sensation in people suffering a rare form of genetic blindness.

Scientists from the Bionic Eye Foundation at Sydney's Prince of Wales Hospital have launched human clinical trials of the device, which employs the same technology now routinely used in cochlear implants to restore hearing.

Professor Minas Coroneo said the trials involved placing small electrodes on the surface of the eye then using an electric current to stimulate the retina, the thin layer of cells in the back of the eye that respond to light.

Coroneo said a video camera attached to a pair of glasses was used to pick up images and transfer them to the electrodes via a computer.

The electrodes then stimulate the retina to send messages down the optic nerve to the visual area of the brain.

While it does not offer full sight, Coroneo said it could one day provide blind people with enough "functional vision" to negotiate their way across a room without bumping into objects.

"The patient will see a pattern of flashes that will outline objects," he told AFP.

"The aim is getting seeing-eye dogs back to being just pets."