

# Moves to oust Taliban gain momentum

AFP, Islamabad

International efforts to find another government for Afghanistan gathered pace Thursday, with fresh approaches to the former king and reports that some Taliban commanders' allegiances may be wavering.

But Mullah Mohammad Omar, the reclusive leader of the radical Islamic militia ruling Afghanistan, showed no fear of threatened US military strikes or any internal challenge to his political and spiritual authority.

"In the event of intervention in Afghanistan there will be no difference between Russia and America," he said in a statement released through the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press.

"The status of Afghans who want to come to power in Afghanistan with the help of American forces will be the same as those Afghans who wanted to come to power with the help of the Russians."

"The Afghans brought by the Americans would be fought like the communists."

The Soviet Union's 10-year occupation ended in a humiliating retreat in 1989, after a resistance campaign led by Islamic militants and backed by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Despite Omar's defiance, there were growing indications Thursday that the Taliban's grip on power was slipping in certain areas, as fears grew over the prospect of a US strike against alleged terrorist bases.

The allegiances of several Taliban allies were said to be wavering in the eastern provinces of Paktia, Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar, where Taliban security was thin or trade had been affected by the militia's refusal

to extradite suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden.

Afghan sources in Pakistan, including businessmen who have regular contact with pro-Taliban district commanders, said some were unhappy due to long-term concerns over a drop in business and current fears of an attack by the United States.

"The commanders are unhappy with the way things are going. Some commanders in Kunar, for example, are no longer making money from the timber trade now the borders are shut," said one source, a member of a non-neutral mujahedin group.

"The Taliban's position in major towns is safe for the moment, but they don't have any real presence in some of the outlying areas. They have abandoned a lot of posts, and local commanders are close to abandoning them," another Afghan source said.

The anti-Taliban opposition controls less than 10 percent of Afghan territory but has been emboldened by promises of more foreign assistance following the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, which have been blamed on bin Laden.

General Fahim, the military commander of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, said Thursday the opposition was prepared to work with anyone who wanted to see peace in the war-ravaged country, including the deposed king, Zahir Shah.

"Any Afghan group or individual who wants to work for peace in Afghanistan, we are prepared to work with them," Fahim told the BBC in an interview.

## Lawmakers call for US visa control, monitoring of visitors after arrival

AP, Washington

Republican and Democratic lawmakers are pushing for background checks for US visa applicants and a sophisticated tracking system to monitor visitors once they arrive.

Dozens of those detained for questioning about the Sept. 11 suicide hijackings had violated immigration rules, and many are charged with overstaying visitor or business visas.

"Right now we have no ability to identify, locate or remove foreigners who deliberately remain in this country long after their tourist or student visas expire," said Sen. Kit Bond, a Republican.

Bond said Wednesday he is introducing legislation to close loopholes in the visa program that may have been exploited by the suspected hijackers. A measure planned by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat, would go even further, closing US borders for six months while similar measures are put in place.

Hijacking suspect Hani Hanjour was issued a student visa. He said he would study English at Holy Names College in Oakland but never enrolled.

## 3 Palestinians killed as Israeli tanks open fire

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli tanks rolled into the Gaza Strip overnight and opened fire on a Palestinian refugee camp, killing three people and wounding at least 31 others, Palestinian security sources said.

The incursion took place just hours after Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had agreed to work to build a lasting truce and brought a quick condemnation from Arafat's aide.

Three of the tanks that took part in the operation were still on the scene early Thursday, 50 meters (yards) inside the autonomous Palestinian zone, the sources said.

Initially, five tanks moved about 100 meters (yards) into Palestinian territory near Rafah, on the border with Egypt, accompanied by bulldozers.

The tanks opened fire with heavy machineguns and cannon on a nearby refugee camp, the sources said, adding that eight houses were destroyed by the bulldozers.

Among the injured, 10 were in serious condition, medical sources said.

Arafat aide Nabil Abu Rudeina said "the Israeli military operation is an attempt ... to torpedo the results

of the meeting" Wednesday between Arafat and Peres.

He called on the US government and the world community to condemn the action as well, saying it had "erased world efforts to restore calm" in the Middle East.

At Gaza airport, not far from Rafah, Peres and Arafat had agreed on a package of measures to stamp out violence and restore trust, almost a year to the day since the start of the intifada.

The meeting lasted around 90 minutes, with Peres and Arafat leaving their delegations to go head-to-head in private for half an hour.

After the meeting, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat read a joint statement vowing a return to "full security cooperation" and pledging to "exert maximum efforts to sustain the declared ceasefire."

He said Israel would begin to lift its military blockade of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which has created a stranglehold on Palestinians' everyday lives, and to redeploy its forces.

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