

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, Nangahar, 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 now-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 10percent 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.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani police block the way of demonstrators in front of the Parliament House in Islamabad during a demonstration organised to show solidarity on Thursday. Thousands of students from schools and colleges and several social welfare groups participated in this rally to show their support with the policy makers of the country in connection with the Afghan crisis. US and Pakistan intelligence experts have agreed to work together to track down Osama bin Laden, Saudi-born militant wanted for the devastating attacks on New York and Washington.

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.

"I know this isn't politically correct," Feinstein said in an interview Wednesday. "Our country is a sieve. These visas are being misused and the time has come to do something about it."

Feinstein would suspend student visas for six months while the Immigration and Naturalisation Service readies a background check system. The State Department decides whether a visa should be issued, but Feinstein said INS must be involved in the screening process.

Her legislation also will seek \$32.3 million for a computerised INS monitoring system to track the nearly 600,000 foreign students at US colleges and universities.

David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, said he prefers Bond's broader approach and opposes halting the visa program. The council's members include most accredited American colleges and universities.

"I'm all for security, but we may as well deal with everybody and not just students, Ward said. "Since student visas are only 2 per cent of the total, it really isn't solving the security problem."

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 aArafataide.

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 betweenArafatand 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.

The White House immediately welcomed the deal as "an important first step" towards peace, after a year-long conflict between Israel and the Palestinians that has claimed more than 820 lives.

Taliban ask fleeing Afghans to return home

REUTERS, Kabul

The leader of Afghanistan's ruling Taliban played down threats of a US attack as unlikely and urged tens of thousands of fleeing Afghans to return home as the United Nations prepared on Thursday for a refugee crisis.

For the purist movement, Thursday marked the fifth anniversary of their capture of Kabul, the symbolic moment when they formally established their government, bringing peace and hard line Islamic rule to their estimated 20

million people.

There was little sign of celebration, although a day earlier a jubilant crowd of peaceful protesters demonstrating against the threatened US attacks in the hunt for the world's most wanted man, Osama bin Laden, spiralled into a frenzied attack on one of the last US symbols in the Afghans capital.

The storming of the US embassy by thousands of Taliban supporters, who set fire to parts of the building deserted more than 12 years ago, gave the United States

a taste of the ferocious hostility it faces if it tries to unseat the Taliban.

It was not clear if Wednesday's attack was orchestrated or spontaneous. Some armed men were clearly trying to hold back the crowd and city firefighters worked hard to tackle the blaze, but other Taliban fighters joined in enthusiastically.

Two turbaned, black-clad Taliban shimmied up the main entrance to the building and used a crowbar and hammer to rip off the huge metal US seal hanging between the pillars.

US pushes for coalition

REUTERS, Washington

The United States stepped up its efforts to win international backing for its "war on terrorism" on Wednesday, courting both NATO and United Nations support as US forces steamed into the Gulf region for possible retaliatory strikes againstAfghanistan.

In New York, grieving families began abandoning hope for loved ones missing in the September 11

attack on the World Trade Center, registering for death certificates in grim acknowledgment that no survivors were expected to be found in the rubble of what were once the city's tallest buildings.

Western leaders sought to assuage fears that the world economy could slip into recession even faster than expected as airline layoffs and corporate earnings warnings piled up. But the US stock

market, which had two successive days of gains this week, went into reverse and the Dow Jones index closed down 92.58 points, or 1.07 percent, at 8,567.39.

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban, now globally isolated, continued to defy US demands that it surrender Saudi-born militant Osama bin Laden, the fugitive Islamic extremist Washington says masterminded the September 11 attacks.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush(C) meets with US Sikh community leaders (names unknown) in the Roosevelt Room of the White House on Wednesday to assure the leaders of his support as he plans for a war against terrorism in the shadow of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City and at the Pentagon that killed thousands of people.

22 massacred in Algeria

AFP, Larba

An armed gang wearing military uniforms massacred 22 people and injured two others in an overnight attack on a village south of the Algerian capital, local people said Thursday.

The killers gunned down 11 people as they were celebrating a wedding near Larba on the rich Mitidja agricultural plain about 30 km from Algiers.

The attackers then burst into a house and killed 11 more people either with automatic weapons or by slitting their throats, witnesses told AFP.

Two people were wounded, including a young girl who was kidnapped but managed to escape her captors though she had a bullet wound.

Vajpayee wins opposition support for anti-terror war

AFP, New Delhi

India's opposition Thursday backed Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's decision to cooperate with the US-led coalition against terrorism but said it should not reflect a new alignment with Washington.

The meeting of opposition parties was convened by Vajpayee, a day after he received "unreserved and wholehearted" support of members of his ruling coalition for his stance.

"We are with the government," Natwar Singh, a senior leader of India's main opposition Congress party, said after the meeting, as quoted by Press Trust of India (PTI).

"But we want the government not to take any such step which

would run counter to the policy of non-alignment pursued by the country," Singh said, referring to India's Cold War policy of not officially siding with either Washington or Moscow.

The movement was founded by leaders of India, Egypt and Yugoslavia in 1961 in Belgrade.

Members of the Communist Party of India urged the government to mobilise non-aligned countries in the fight against terrorism, the PTI report said.

India has offered to let US warplanes refuel on or over its territory and provide logistical help should Washington choose to strike suspected terrorist bases in Afghanistan, where alleged terrorist Osama bin Laden is believed to be hiding.

100 hurt as trains collide head-on in Germany

AFP, Lindau

About 100 people were hurt, more than 20 of them seriously, when two passenger trains collided head-on Thursday in southern Germany, police said.

At least seven people were in critical condition after the crash at Enzisweiler near Lindau in Bavaria, police said. The seven included the drivers of both trains.

Police said about 20 more people were seriously injured and that around 70 suffered slight injuries.

Both of the local trains were full at

the time.

A major rescue operation was underway as police sealed off the wooded area at the scene of the crash.

The accident happened about 7:30 am (0530 GMT) on a single-track line between Wasserburg and Lindau on the shore of Lake Constance not far from the border with Austria.

Many of the passengers on board the trains were school pupils or students aged 10 to 20. Others were commuters going to work.

UN prosecutors indict 11 for murder in East Timor

AFP, Jakarta

Prosecutors in East Timor filed indictments Thursday against 11 people accused of extermination, murder, forced deportations and inhumane acts in 1999 in the isolated enclave of Oecussi.

Two are Indonesian army sergeants and nine are members of the pro-Indonesian Sakunar militia, United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor spokesman Peter Biro told AFP.

One of the accused Sakunar militiamen is in custody in the East

Timor capital Dili, Biro said by phone from Dili. The rest are at large, believed to be in Indonesia.

The alleged crimes, including two massacres, took place between April and October 1999, the months surrounding the former Indonesian province's overwhelming August 30 vote for independence.

Militias backed by the Indonesian military led a wave of slaughter and destruction before and after the UN-sponsored ballot, and forced an estimated quarter of a million people over the border into Indonesian-ruled West Timor.

Dreams of newcomers in 'paradise' shaken

AP, Bogota

When Mariana Bruzzone moved from Argentina to the United States, she envisioned leaving behind an economic crisis, getting a professional job and buying a house.

That was before the September 11 terrorists attacks ended her faith in the United States as a haven of security and economic opportunity.

Bruzzone, 25, is flying home with her Argentine boyfriend on Saturday.

"I'm scared about what happened here in the United States," said Bruzzone, who lives in Miami. "I think there may be more attacks."

From Brazil to Hong Kong US consulates report that visa requests have dropped by as much as 70 per cent since the attack.

With workers removing rubble and corpses from the ruins of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the US economy taking a dive, the perception around the world of America as a haven of safety and prosperity has been deeply shaken.

In Hong Kong, requests for US visas have dropped 70 per cent since the attack, compared to the same period last year. In Chile, they are down at least 50 per cent. In Brazil, lines of people applying

for visas used to form at dawn outside the US consulate in Rio de Janeiro and snake onto President Wilson Avenue. Today, those lines are much shorter.

About 840,000 people from around the world became Naturalized US citizens in 1999 up from 308,000 in 1991 with Mexico and the Philippines providing the largest share. Now, some new arrivals are actually leaving.

"We came looking for economic security and to build professional careers," Bruzzone said. "We wanted to live well here, buy a house, to have our car, to have children and see them grow up here with better education."

As Washington prepares a counterstrike against terrorism, many Muslims across the globe are especially concerned, fearing they might be attacked or harassed in the United States.

The 19 suspected hijackers who carried out the terror attacks are all believed to be Muslim and connected to Osama bin Laden, an Islamic fundamentalist hiding in Afghanistan.

"Before today, America was a land of opportunities for me," says Yasar Shafi, a medical student in New Delhi. "From today, it would be the worst place on earth to be (because) I am a Muslim."



PHOTO: AFP

19-year-old Miss Israel, Dikla Elkabets (C) poses for photographers while holding her trophy and a digital camera after winning the Miss Photogenic in the Miss International Beauty Pageant press preview at a Tokyo hotel on Thursday. 53 beauties will compete for the October 4 Miss International crown in Tokyo.

War on terror Pope urges US to tread carefully

AFP, Yerevan

Pope John Paul II wound up his tour of the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan and Armenia on Thursday with a message to Washington to show "magnanimity" towards weaker nations as it considers its response to this month's terrorist attacks.

The fallout from the attacks on New York and Washington has dominated the pope's visits, especially since both Armenia and Kazakhstan are close to Afghanistan, a likely target for US reprisals, and in a region driven by tensions between Christians and Muslims.

Aid workers face Taliban trial Saturday

AFP, Sydney

Eight Western aid workers held in Afghanistan on charges of preaching Christianity will go on trial on Saturday, the Australian foreign ministry said Thursday.

The trial began last month but was suspended following the terrorist attacks in the United States and US demands to Afghanistan's Taliban rulers that they hand over suspected terror mastermind Osama bin Laden.

The protocol chief at the Taliban Foreign Ministry in Kabul, Abdur Afghani, has told Australian diplomats in Islamabad the aid workers -- two Americans, four Germans and two Australians -- are "fine".

Berlusconi stirs controversy with anti-Islam remarks

AFP, Rome

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi faced a storm of controversy Thursday after some undiplomatic remarks suggesting that Christianity was superior to Islam.

The political opposition and the press laid into the conservative leader for remarks which were, at the very least, ill-judged at a time when the West was trying to rally the Muslim world to join its fight against terrorism.

Even Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel, leading an EU mission to the Middle East, on Thursday denounced Berlusconi's reported remarks as "not acceptable" and "not in line with European decisions and European values."