

Taliban's days are numbered: US

AFP, Kabul

The countdown to conflict in Afghanistan was ticking faster Monday with a US warning that the Taliban's days in power were numbered and the ruling Islamic militia threatening a protracted guerrilla war.

As the Taliban admitted for the first time that it was shielding terrorist suspect Osama bin Laden, the militia's reclusive leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, vowed late Sunday that his forces would emerge victorious from a long guerrilla war if attacked by the United States.

"The (Taliban) government may collapse, but it will be the same as during the time of the jihad (against the Soviet Union). New fronts will be established, just like against the communists," Omar said in a broadcast on Taliban-run Radio Shariat.

"You may capture the airports and the capital and the cities, but people will go to the mountains," Omar said.

"God willing, I believe that neither the US or their allies will be able to do anything. They will only find the same destiny as the communists."

His broadcast came shortly after the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaeef, said bin Laden was under their protection and being kept at a secret location for his own safety.

"Osama bin Laden is under the control of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and only security people know where he is," Zaeef told reporters.

"He is in Afghanistan in an unknown place for his safety and security," Zaeef said. "I want to state categorically that Osama bin Laden will not be handed to anyone."

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said he had no reason to believe the Taliban was controlling bin Laden, but Washington warned it

would move to throw the regime out of power unless it handed him over.

"The Taliban organisation has worked in close concert with Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network," White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card told Fox News Sunday.

"They cannot be a party to these terrorist acts, and if they're going to continue to be a party to the terrorist acts, they should not be in power."

But Card stopped short of saying the United States would replace the Taliban regime, saying Washington was primarily interested in ridding the world of terrorists and their havens.

Bin Laden, who is accused of masterminding the devastating suicide hijackings in the United States on September 11, has been living in Afghanistan since 1996 as a "guest" of the Taliban, which rules most of the country except for pockets under the control of ethnic-based opposition forces.

In his radio broadcast, Taliban leader Omar also attacked Afghanistan's 86-year-old former king, Mohammed Zahir, for talking with US congressmen about him forming an alliance with anti-Taliban factions.

He then delivered a chilling warning to Afghans collaborating with anti-Taliban elements: "Afghans should not fulfil the interests of the United States. If you pay no attention to Islam and God's law, then your death will be allowed."

Meanwhile Pervaz Musharraf, president of Afghanistan's neighbour Pakistan, told CNN that he hopes the Taliban would comply with US demands were now "very dim."

He again pledged to help the US war on terrorism with intelligence-sharing, overflight rights and logistical support.



Rescue workers carry an injured man in Srinagar yesterday after a car bomb explosion outside state legislative assembly. At least 22 people were killed and nearly three dozen injured in an explosion outside the state legislature building in Indian-administered Kashmir.

Blast outside Kashmir parliament : 22 killed

AFP, Srinagar

Some 22 people were killed and nearly three dozen injured yesterday in a powerful suicide bombing and gunfight at the state legislature building in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said.

A Pakistan-based Islamic militant group claimed responsibility for the attack, saying a suicide bomber drove to the legislature in a car laden with explosives.

The blast caused damage to at least 150 buildings or street stalls around the tightly guarded legislature, including a six-storey hotel.

Witnesses said gunfire was still heard three and a half hours after the attack inside the legislature, which two militants had managed to enter.

Police said 22 people died, 18 of them from injuries in the suicide bombing and four in the gunfight.

The dead included two policemen, one paramilitary and a woman. No politicians were immediately believed to have been killed.

"Many people bled to death as no one dared to rush to the spot," said Abdul Rashid, a local shopkeeper.

The explosion took place at about 2:00 pm (0800 GMT) in the heart of Indian Kashmir's summer capital of Srinagar, after Kashmir's Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah and several of his cabinet ministers had left, official sources said.

The speaker of the Kashmir assembly, Abdul Ahad Vakil, and a few legislators were inside the building, but security forces brought them out of the building safely, the sources added.

The area around the state legislature was immediately sealed off by Indian border guards, who turned away traffic throughout downtown Srinagar.

Bush approves covert aid for anti-Taliban forces

AFP, New York

US President George W. Bush has approved a covert plan to strengthen forces opposed to Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia, the New York Times reported Monday.

The report came after the Taliban, contradicting earlier statements, acknowledged Sunday that the militia was protecting Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden, accused by US authorities of masterminding the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

The Times said the covert aid would aim at strengthening the Northern Alliance that is fighting the Taliban from northern Afghanistan, and would also be used to stir up resistance among Pashtun tribal groups in the south.

Fiji parliament reopens

AFP, Suva

Parliamentary democracy was Monday restored to troubled Fiji as coup plotter and new member of parliament George Speight was refused bail to attend.

The swearing-in of 70 of the 71 MPs was the first official function in the parliamentary complex since Speight and his special forces supporters seized it on May 19 last year and took then prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his government hostage, holding them for 56 days.

Speight won a seat in general elections that returned democracy to Fiji but authorities refused to allow him to attend Monday's ceremony.

Later in the day his lawyers applied for bail so that he could attend Tuesday's formal opening but High Court Justice Peter Summan refused.

Estrada in court under heavy guard

AFP, Manila

Ousted Philippine leader Joseph Estrada was brought under heavy guard to a special graft court Monday for a landmark corruption trial after he threatened to boycott the hearing.

Police Deputy Director General Thompson Lantion personally escorted Estrada from a military hospital, where he is under detention, to the Sandiganbayan anti-graft court.

Wearing a beige jacket and cream colored trousers, a glum-looking Estrada slowly sauntered to an empty defendant's bench with his son Jose Ejercito, who is jointly accused with his father of plundering about 80 million dollars.

Jennifer Lopez ties the knot

AFP, Los Angeles

Pop star Jennifer Lopez married choreographer Cris Judd late Saturday during a ceremony attended by family, friends and few show business glitterati, US media reported.

Lopez, 31, was married in an outdoor ceremony in Calabasas, California, north of Los Angeles, before some 170 family members and friends amid tight security, USA Today reported.

Lopez publicist Alan Nierob said the singer strode down the aisle in an off-white Valentino gown with V-neckline and plunging back.

A non-denominational service was held. The couple's honeymoon was to take place in an undisclosed location.

'Americans lack courage' Prospects of Laden's handover dim

AP, Islamabad

Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar told the people of Afghanistan not to fear US military strikes, because "Americans don't have the courage to come here."

Meanwhile, the president of Pakistan -- which has been trying to broker a handover by Afghanistan of Osama bin Laden, the No. 1 suspect in the September 11 terror attacks in the United States -- acknowledged chances of the Taliban giving him up were "very dim."

In Afghanistan's beleaguered capital, Kabul, the first World Food Program convoy since the start of the crisis arrived Monday. Eight trucks carrying 218 tons of wheat made it through to the city after a bone-jarring journey over rutted

roads, said WFP spokesman Khalid Mansour said in neighboring Pakistan.

The Taliban said publicly for the first time Sunday that they know bin Laden's location and he is under their control. Since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, they had said they didn't know where he was, but then said they could deliver messages to him.

Word on bin Laden's status came from the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaeef. He also left open the door to talks -- an offer rejected by Washington, which said bin Laden's handover is not negotiable.

Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, denied any role in the terrorist attacks and blamed them on unspecified US policies in an inter-

view with Taliban-run Kabul Radio. He repeatedly warned the United States to "think and think again" about attacking Afghanistan.

"Americans don't have the courage to come here," he said. During the interview, Omar repeatedly warned the United States to "think and think again" about attacking his country, which drove out Soviet invaders with US assistance in the 1979-1989 war.

"If you attack us, there will be no difference between you and the Russians," he said.

Pakistan's president, Gen Pervez Musharraf, told CNN in an interview aired Sunday that hopes that the Taliban will hand over bin Laden and accede to other US demands are "very dim."



Protesters march shouting anti-war slogans on Sunday in downtown Washington, DC. Thousands of anti-war demonstrators, including many anti-globalization militants, took to the streets of Washington to protest possible US military action in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US.

Truce with Palestinians not working: Israel Car bomb blast in Jerusalem

AFP, Jerusalem

A senior Israeli official said Monday that a ceasefire with the Palestinian Authority was not working, following a car bombing in Jerusalem and a series of clashes in the Palestinian territories.

"It is obvious that the Palestinian Authority is not doing enough, or anything to stop the violence. We don't see a ceasefire, only the continuation of terror," Avi Pazner, a close aide to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, told AFP.

"What we can see on the ground is that the ceasefire is not taking place. The proof of the pudding is in the eating," he said, after a car bomb exploded in Jerusalem and Israel reported more than 50 shooting attacks since a ceasefire agreed last week. He said the government would decide on its next course of action in light of the violence, after the security cabinet gave

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat until Monday night to enforce the truce.

But Pazner said because of the Jewish holiday of sukkot, which starts late Monday and runs until the same time Tuesday, any decision could be delayed.

Meanwhile, a car bomb exploded in southern Jerusalem early Monday, without causing any injuries, in the first such attack since a ceasefire agreed upon on September 18, police spokesman Gil Kleiman said.

"A car bomb went off in the Talpiot area in west Jerusalem, without causing any injuries," Kleiman said.

The car exploded in a parking lot near a central intersection leading to the Talpiot industrial zone, close to the boundary with occupied east Jerusalem.

Several cars close to the exploded vehicle caught fire in the

blast, Kleiman said, while the booby-trapped car itself was totally destroyed.

The area was sealed off as emergency and security services rushed to the scene.

Police said the bomb weighed around eight kilos (17 pounds) and was packed with bullets from assault rifles.

Explosives experts were checking the area for a possible second device in the area. Palestinian militants have in the past used a smaller device to lure in emergency services, with a second larger bomb designed to kill police and rescuers.

Three people were suffering from shock after the blast, police said.

On September 18, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat called for a ceasefire "on all fronts", but the call rejected by several Islamic groups.

C'wealth summit likely in Feb or March

AFP, Sydney

A date for a rescheduled meeting of Commonwealth heads is likely to be set during a meeting between Australia's Prime Minister John Howard and Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon here Tuesday.

McKinnon, who was in Brisbane to thank staff who had planned the postponed Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) which had been due to begin on Saturday, confirmed the leaders' forum would be staged in Brisbane early next year, probably in February or March.

"I would hope that we would get close to it because the sooner we can, the sooner people can start marking their calendars," McKinnon told a news conference.

Queensland state Premier Peter

Beattie also confirmed that the Queen, who was to have opened CHOGM this weekend, would attend next year's belated summit.

The Queen's visit to Canberra, Queensland and South Australia was called off following the unprecedented postponement of CHOGM, due to be held in Brisbane from October 6-9.

McKinnon said he had no choice but to cancel CHOGM after more than 20 of the 54 Commonwealth leaders, including the British, Indian and Canadian prime ministers and all 12 Caribbean leaders, indicated they would not attend.

The leaders who pulled out of CHOGM were facing mounting political pressure to remain close to home during the international crisis following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

Thousands mourn death of Madhav Rao

AFP, New Delhi

Thousands of Indians on Monday mourned Madhav Rao Scindia, a former maharaja and a key leader of the main opposition Congress, whose death in a plane crash at the weekend has dealt the 115-year-old party a serious blow.

Scindia, 56, Congress' deputy leader in parliament, is the party's second younger-generation politician to meet an untimely death within 18 months.

Rajesh Pilot, a dynamic 55-year-old considered a rebel within the party, died in a road accident in June last year.

UK freezes Taliban assets

AFP, Brighton

Britain has frozen 88 million dollars of assets linked to Afghanistan's ruling Taliban regime, finance minister Gordon Brown was due to announce Monday.

The chancellor was to reveal the move in his keynote speech to the ruling Labour Party's annual conference, resuming in Brighton, southern England, in a mood dominated by the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

According to extracts from his speech given to the press, he was to stress the importance of cutting off the "lifeblood" flow of finance to terrorists.

The hardline Taliban regime is

harbouring Osama bin Laden, the chief suspect for the devastating suicide plane attacks on New York and Washington which are thought to have killed around 6,000 people.

The assets suspected of belonging to the Taliban were frozen in the London branch of a European bank, newspapers reported.

In his speech, Brown was expected to give details of the financial aspects of emergency legislation already announced by Prime Minister Tony Blair to crack down on terrorist networks.

They would include greater monitoring of bank accounts; stricter duties on banks to report suspicious activities; and more powers to freeze accounts from the onset of an investigation.

At home, Brown insists that Britain is well placed economically to withstand the burden of the global coalition against terrorism spearheaded by the United States.

He told BBC radio ahead of his speech that it was a responsibility that the government had to accept.

"We will pay the price that is necessary, the security, the military, indeed the international development responsibilities -- we accept this," he said.

"Of course there are costs involved but we are, I think, as a country, better placed than 10 years ago, 20 years ago, to deal with costs because we did make the difficult decisions in 1997," when Labour took power.

Six to eight months needed to oust Taliban: Opposition

AFP, London

The Afghan resistance could overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan "within six to eight months" if the West supplied it with arms and cash, the brother of assassinated commander Ahmad Shah Masood said in an interview Monday.

Vali Masood, charge d'affaires in London for the Afghan government ousted by the Taliban Islamist militia but still recognised by most of the international community, called in the Guardian daily for a "joint force to fight terrorism".

He pointed out: "This is our country, we know the terrain, we have got experienced fighters and the world community has got resources."

And he disclosed that Northern Alliance rebels and the US were discussing coordinated action to capture Osama bin Laden and overthrow the Taliban, but urged the United States to act quickly to capitalise on the Taliban's disarray.

"Among the Taliban the situation is tense, hundreds of them are fleeing, their morale has gone down. The more you delay (attacking the Taliban) the more their morale will increase and they will be more courageous to stay and they have already announced the Americans are backing down," he said.

Vali Masood said bin Laden, the chief suspect in last month's US terrorist attacks, was currently in either Kandahar or Zabul, provinces which are Taliban strongholds in the south east of the country.

The Saudi-born Islamist extremist was there under high security with the complicity of the Pakistani secret services, he claimed.

The Northern Alliance, formerly headed by his brother who died in a fatal explosion on September 9 caused by terrorists posing as Arab journalists, could overthrow the Taliban regime "within six to eight months" if the West supplied it with arms and money, the envoy said.



John Weigel, owner of the Australian Reptile Park unsuccessfully attempts to kiss five metre long and 700 kilogram Eric the Crocodile who is celebrating his 55th birthday in Sydney on Monday. Eric who was captured after being implicated in the deaths of two people in Australia's north and was then sent to a breeding program where after having his foot bitten off and himself biting off the heads of two female crocodiles, he was relocated to the park.