



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan refugee children cross into Pakistan territory at the Chaman border, some 150 km from Pakistan's southwestern city of Quetta on Saturday. Thousands of Afghan refugees, who have fled their homeland of Afghanistan fearing US military attacks in retaliation for the September 11 terrorist strikes in New York and Washington, are facing great difficulties without proper winter clothing and shelter as the weather changes.

Taliban offer to trade aid workers for withdrawal of US threat

AFP, Islamabad

Efforts by Afghanistan's ruling Taliban to hold on to power took on an increasingly desperate air Saturday, as the militia effectively turned eight detained foreign aid workers into hostages against US military strikes.

With US military forces converging on its borders and diplomatic manoeuvres to establish a successor regime in Kabul intensifying, the Taliban chose to play one of the last cards in its hand.

The foreign aid workers -- two Americans, two Australians and four Germans -- were arrested in early August along with 16 Afghan colleagues.

In the statement, carried by the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP), the Taliban said international "humanitarian" concerns over the fate of the aid workers smacked of hypocrisy.

"If these eight detainees are important, then what about those Afghans who have been forced to leave their homes due to American threats in the midst of severe drought, oppressive sanctions and winter?" it said.

"Is the life of these children, women and old men not important?"

The United States has threatened military action against the Taliban over its refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden, the main suspect in the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

More than 35,000 military personnel, 350 aircraft and at least two aircraft battle groups were standing by off South Asia and in the Arabian peninsula.

Around 1,000 crack US infantry troops, specialists in the harsh winter climate now descending on Afghanistan, were en route to neighbouring Uzbekistan.

US and British commandos are already reportedly inside Afghanistan scouting out targets in their hunt for bin Laden.

The diplomatic stranglehold on the fundamentalist regime was also tightening after Britain and Pakistan agreed the outlines of a post-Taliban administration.

Following talks with President Pervez Musharraf in Islamabad, Prime Minister Tony Blair said both sides had agreed that a new Afghan government would have to be "broad based, and every key ethnic group included".

Pakistan has "a valid interest in close involvement with the arrangements for any such successor regime", Blair added.

Islamabad helped the Taliban, a collection of "Islamic students" which rose out of refugee camps in Pakistan, to power in Kabul in 1996 but has distanced itself from its former proteges since last month's attacks.

Just hours after Blair left Islamabad, the Taliban ordered the release of detained British journalist Yvonne Ridley, arrested a week ago for entering the country illegally.

Taliban ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Salam Zaeef told the

Pakistan-based AIP that Ridley would be released "either today or tomorrow."

The militia had previously said it would put Ridley on trial and was investigating possible spying charges against her.

In Italy, a top aide to former Afghan monarch Mohammed Zahir Shah said an envoy would be sent to Pakistan to outline plans for a post-Taliban government.

The move would constitute the first direct contact between a united Afghan opposition and Pakistan since Zahir Shah forged a powerful supreme council uniting disparate Afghan opposition groups at talks in Rome this week.

The opposition forces received a morale booster Friday with a bill was presented to the US Congress aimed at providing Taliban opponents with military financing and equipping President George W. Bush with tools he needs to "prevail" in a likely conflict in Afghanistan.

The fear of impending US strikes has compounded the misery for ordinary Afghans already suffering from decades of civil war and years of drought.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said the situation for Afghan women and children in particular was getting worse.

US News and World Report says Military chief of Al-Qaeda masterminded attacks

AFP, Washington

US intelligence agencies believe Mohammed Atef, the military chief of Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda terrorist network, was the operational mastermind behind the September 11 terror attacks, US News and World Report said in its yesterday's edition.

The paper quoted intelligence sources as saying Atef, an Egyptian former police officer, was the Al-Qaeda member British Prime Minister Tony Blair alluded to in a white paper he presented to parliament on Thursday.

"We have learned that one of bin Laden's closest and most senior associates was responsible for the

detailed planning of the attacks," Blair said.

After quitting the police force, Atef joined the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and helped bin Laden recruit Arab fighters to battle Soviet troops in the Afghan war in the early 1980s, the daily said.

In 1989, he helped bin Laden found Al-Qaeda, and later travelled to Sudan with him, where he took charge of bin Laden's security.

One of bin Laden's top two aides, Atef was videotaped earlier this year giving away his daughter in a marriage to one of bin Laden's sons, the paper said.

It further cited intelligence analysts as saying Atef would likely become the leader of al-Qaeda should the Saudi-born bin Laden be

killed.

AP adds: US Law enforcement and intelligence officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the Associated Press on Friday that the investigation into the origins of the Sept 11 plot is focusing on a small number of bin Laden lieutenants that include Ayman al-Zawahri, Mohamed Atef and Abu Zubaydah.

In recent days, the international police organisation Interpol issued an arrest warrant for al-Zawahri, identified as bin Laden's most trusted deputy and head of the al-Jihad terrorist group in Egypt that merged in 1998 with bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

US redesignates 26 terrorist groups

AFP, Washington

The United States Friday redesignated 26 extremist groups, including Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, as "foreign terrorist organisations" but dropped the Japanese Red Army and Peru's Tupac Amaru guerrilla movement from its list of banned entities.

In addition, Secretary of State Colin Powell added two groups -- the Real IRA and the Colombian paramilitary United Self-Defense Forces (AUC) both of which had been designated terrorist organisations earlier this year -- to the list in a formal notification to Congress.

US law requires the State Department to notify Congress every two years of the designation to keep sanctions imposed on the groups from lapsing. Those sanctions had been set to expire on

Monday.

"Every one of these groups has continued to engage in terrorist activity over the past two years," Powell said in a statement.

The Japanese Red Army and Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement were dropped from the list because they are no longer active and do not fit the criteria for inclusion, officials said.

Powell stressed that the decision to drop them did not condone previous terrorist acts and was not intended to be a signal that Washington now considered them to be legitimate groups.

The timing of Friday's notification had nothing to do with the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and was unrelated to the US-led war on terrorism declared in the wake of those strikes.

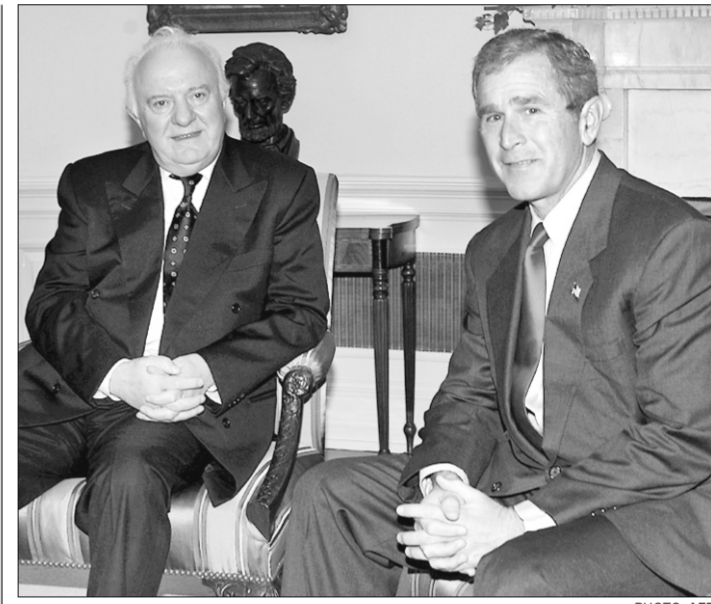


PHOTO: AFP

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze (L) and US President George W. Bush meet in the Oval Office of the White House on Friday in Washington, DC. Shevardnadze is on a three-day visit to Washington to discuss the US war on terrorism.

Taliban order release of UK journalist

AFP, Islamabad

The Taliban said Saturday it would release British female journalist Yvonne Ridley, arrested a week ago for entering Afghanistan illegally.

Taliban ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Salam Zaeef told the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) that Ridley would be released "either today or tomorrow."

"Taliban leader (Mullah Mohammad Omar) issued the order following the British government's request for her release," Zaeef said.

The statement, which came hours after British Prime Minister Tony Blair made a lightning visit to Pakistan, did not mention any conditions placed on Ridley's release.

Laden's group plotted to kill King Abdallah

AFP, Rome

Jordan's King Abdallah II and his family were the targets of a foiled terrorist attack planned by an Islamic group linked to Osama bin Laden, prime suspect in the attacks on the US, the Corriere della Sera newspaper said on Saturday quoting Jordanian secret services.

According to the paper, the attack was foiled in summer 2000 as the Jordanian monarch had just begun his summer holiday in Europe on his yacht, accompanied by his wife Queen Rania, who was pregnant at the time, and the two other children.

The paper said the plan was very detailed and the threat regarded as extremely serious. It involved ramming the yacht with a speedboat packed with explosives driven by suicide bombers. An attack on the same lines was carried out in October 2000 on a US warship off Aden in Yemen.

Pak family perishes in Saudi road tragedy

AFP, Riyadh

Six Pakistani children and their parents were killed and a seventh child critically injured when their car collided head-on with a jeep on the road leading to Qatar, a newspaper reported Saturday.

The father, mother and children aged between three months and nine years were killed instantly on Friday, while an eight-year-old daughter was taken to hospital in critical condition, Al-Iqtisadia daily said.

The driver of the jeep, an Emirati national, was also killed. The accident took place in the Saudi Ahsa province on a road linking Saudi Arabia to the Gulf Arab states of Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

15 die in India after drinking moonshine

AFP, Madras

Fifteen people died and 30 others were in hospital after drinking moonshine liquor in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, police said Saturday.

The victims drank the potent brew, a country liquor known as sarayam, Friday and soon complained of giddiness and loss of vision. Five died en route to hospital while 10 died later, police said. Another 30 people were in hospital, some of them critically ill. Police arrested a woman and an accomplice accused of selling the moonshine in Puzhal, a town 20 km north of Madras.

US takes Sharon to task

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was taken to task by Washington on Friday for his "unacceptable" comments on US policy in the Middle East, while a last-ditch Palestinian effort to salvage a ceasefire was shaken by further violence.

At a press conference on Thursday night, Sharon told US President George W. Bush that in forging his coalition against terrorism that he should not try "to appease the Arabs at our expense. We won't accept it."

He called on the Western democracies "not to commit again the terrible mistake made in 1938 when European democracies sacrificed Czechoslovakia for a

temporary solution.

"Israel will not be Czechoslovakia," he warned. Sharon was alluding to the 1938 Munich conference, when European powers yielded to German dictator Adolf Hitler and allowed him to take over part of Czechoslovakia.

In response, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said that US Secretary of State Colin Powell told Sharon in a phone call Friday that Bush had deeded his comments about appeasing Arabs at Israel's expense "unacceptable."

Sharon advisor Dore Gold scrambled to strike a conciliatory tone Friday after Washington's scathing criticism.

Hitler's gay preferences

REUTERS, Berlin

Adolf Hitler had numerous homosexual friendships in the 1920s and the dictator's later life can only be understood by taking into account his gay preferences, a German historian said on Friday.

In a book to be launched at next week's Frankfurt book fair, Lothar Machtan, Modern History Professor at Bremen University, hopes to shed new light on old speculation that the Nazi leader was a closet homosexual.

"Adolf Hitler was fond of men. He had a homosexual nature," Machtan told Die Welt daily in an interview due for publication on Saturday. "This seems at first quite trivial. But it is a detail that helps us to see his biography from another angle."

Machtan, author of "Hitler's secret the double life of a dictator," said the subject had been taboo among historians, partly because examining Hitler's private life might be seen as a step towards humanising him and excusing his crimes.

Violence claims 8 in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Four security personnel and four Islamic separatist militants were killed in incidents in Indian-administered Kashmir on Saturday, a police spokesman said.

Three Indian army soldiers were killed when their vehicle ran over an explosive planted on the road by suspected militants in Devsar, near Kulgam township, 70 km south of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar.

Six soldiers were injured, four of them seriously, in the blast, the spokesman said.

In Anantnag district, 12 people were injured when a grenade hurled by suspected militants at an Indian security force patrol missed its target and exploded at a bus stand, the spokesman said.

India plans tough anti-hijack measures

REUTERS, New Delhi

India will authorise the shooting down of civilian aircraft in a hijack emergency under a security plan being drawn up after the attacks on the United States and a hijack scare in India, a newspaper said yesterday.

The Hindustan Times said the security plan, which is almost complete, is expected to be implemented after approval by a cabinet panel on security.

The daily, quoting unnamed senior government sources, said the new crisis management plan will include creation of independent groups authorised to take on-the-spot action.

Anti-US rally in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

The leader of a radical Islamic party on Saturday urged 5,000 supporters at a protest rally to attack any US military plane found on Pakistani soil.

"If you see an American military plane on Pakistani soil, destroy it," Jamia Ulema-Islam chief Maulana Fazlur Rahman told the demonstrators at the anti-US rally in the north-western city of Peshawar.

Witnesses said the protesters

carried banners reading "Death to America, Osama, We Are With You and 'We Are Ready For Jihad.'" They also burned effigies of US President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Afghanistan's Taliban regime is facing the threat of US military reprisals for its refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden -- the Saudi-born dissident fingered by the United States as the mastermind behind last month's terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

Rahman also denounced Blair's announcement in Islamabad on Friday that Britain and Pakistan had agreed on the need for a "broad-based government" to replace the Taliban.

"Broad-based government in Afghanistan is a cliché. It has never worked in the past," Rahman said, adding that plans to bring back exiled Afghan king Mohammed Zahir Shah at the head of a transitional administration were doomed to failure.

'Anti-Taliban forces fighting war for themselves, not US'

AFP, Islamabad

A spokesman for deposed Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani warned the United States on Saturday to remember the opposition's fight against the Taliban was the "Afghan people's war."

While still courting the super-power's military support to defeat the fundamentalist Islamic regime, Rabbani's spokesman stressed the opposition was not fighting a war for the United States.

"We were preparing an offensive before any terrorist attacks took place in the US," Sayed Najeeb Hashimi said.

"We are not fighting step by step with Americans. We have our own strategy."

The opposition, known as the Northern Alliance, controls about 10 percent of Afghanistan, which has been ruled by the Taliban since 1996.

The alliance has repeatedly appealed to the United States to back its war against the Taliban since Washington vowed to eradicate terrorism following the September 11 kamikaze plane attacks on Washington and New York.

However the opposition is also sensitive to internal criticism that it is becoming a US puppet.

Afghanistan is the US-led global alliance's primary target because the Taliban is protecting the accused architect of the attacks, Osama bin Laden.

Hashimi also acknowledged the opposition made a lot of mistakes when it briefly held power following the defeat of the Soviet invaders in 1989, but insisted it deserved another chance.

The opposition quickly disintegrated amid internal disputes and the country was wracked by further violence, paving the way for the emergence of the hardline Taliban, which overthrew Rabbani.

"It's obvious that people don't have a good memory of the Mujahideen (opposition fighters), but people also know that Pakistan was involved in the creation of civil war," Hashimi said, referring to Afghanistan's neighbour that backed the Taliban until the September 11 attacks.

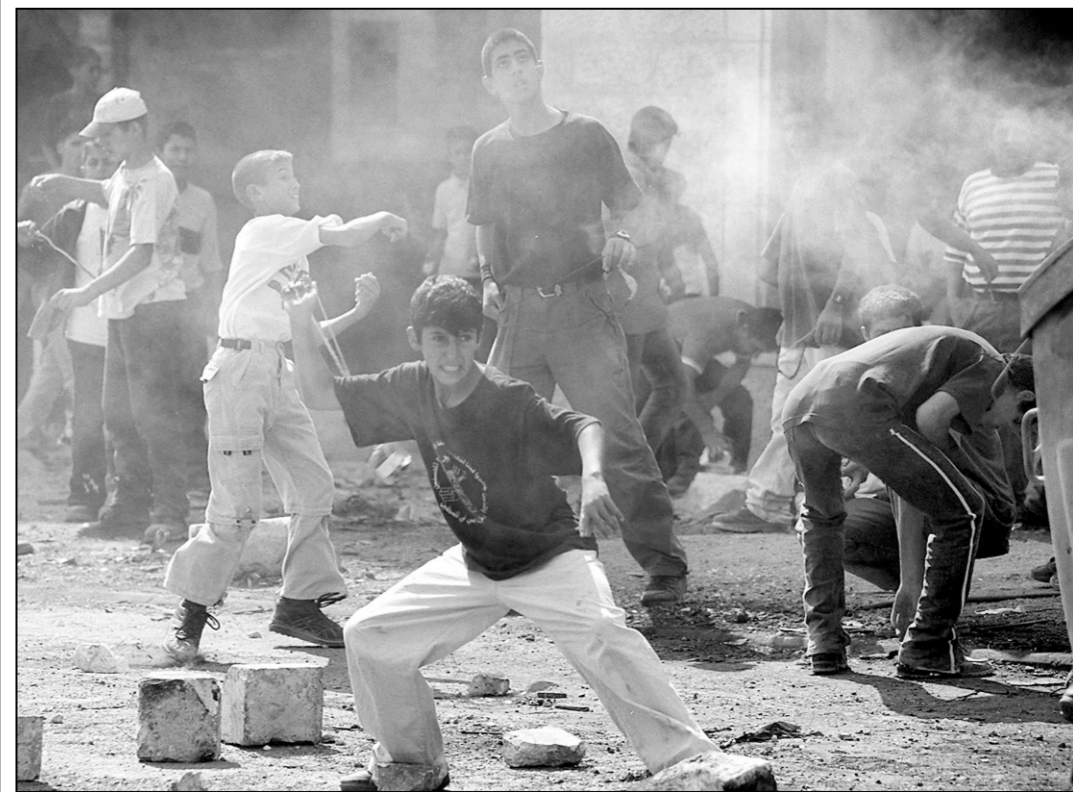


PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian youths throw stones at Israeli soldiers during clashes in the West Bank town of Bethlehem on Friday. Five Palestinians were killed in a dawn incursion by Israeli troops into the Hebron neighborhoods of Al-Sheikh and Abu Snehay, which was confirmed by an Israeli army spokesman who said the army would remain on the site "as long as necessary."

UNGA shelves terrorism resolution after debate

AFP, United Nations

The UN General Assembly wound up five days of debate on terrorism Friday by shelving a draft resolution because of divisions among its 189 member states, diplomats said.

The assembly's indecision was in sharp contrast to the legally binding demands made on member states by the Security Council last week, and raised doubts about the global coalition the United States is trying to assemble.

Convened after the September 11 attacks on the United States that left more than 5,000 dead or missing, the debate attracted 156 speakers, the largest number ever on a single agenda item, assembly spokesman Jan Fischer said.

"That in itself signifies something," Fischer told reporters Friday, in spite of the fact that "it was decided it was probably not wise at the moment to have a resolution."

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who told delegates on Monday they had a critical, and "not merely symbolic," part to play in fighting terrorism, put a brave face on things Friday, saying the debate was "only a beginning."

"What is important is that the whole international community has come together to fight the scourge of terrorism," Annan told reporters.

But the debate revealed more shades of opinion than suggested by the stark choice put to delegates by New