

Opposition takes key district after mass Taliban defection

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan opposition said it had taken a key Taliban district Saturday after 800 Taliban fighters changed sides as US planes continued to pound the ruling militia's frontlines.

The opposition seizure of Aq-Kupruk district, 70 km south of the key city of Mazar-i-Sharif, came as the Taliban claimed to have shot down two US helicopters and was reported to have hanged three supporters of Afghan royalist envoy Hamid Karzai.

Aq-Kupruk was taken after a three-hour battle which started at midnight (1930 GMT Friday), Qari Quadrutullah, a spokesman for Northern Alliance commander Atta Mohammad, told AFP.

He added that fighting was continuing Saturday around the nearby district of Keshendeh.

A Taliban spokesman in Kabul admitted there had been fighting in the region but refused to give other details.

Aq-Kupruk and Keshendeh are in Balkh province where there has been mounting pressure on Taliban frontlines from the Northern Alliance as it seeks to get closer to Mazar-i-Sharif.

Atta's spokesman said "links" were established with Taliban fighters before the battle and

"800 of them changed sides to the opposition during the battle. With their cooperation we were able to capture the district."

Quadrutullah said 200 other Taliban fighters were captured but he did not give details of casualties for either side.

US jets heavily bombarded Taliban frontlines north of Kabul late Friday and early Saturday. The opposition Northern Alliance has said it is readying troops for an offensive, possibly against the Afghan capital.

Maulvi Najibullah, Taliban consul in the Pakistani border city of Peshawar, told the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) news agency that militia fighters had shot down two US helicopters in the southern province of Ghazni.

The United States has admitted losing one helicopter Friday in bad weather.

"One helicopter fell in Hockack in Nawur district and the other in the village of Hasrat," Najibullah said.

The two places are near to each other and AIP cited sources as saying there was doubt whether the debris was one helicopter or two. Najibullah admitted it was difficult to get information from the region because snow had started to fall.

The US Defence Department on Friday said one helicopter had crashed landed in Afghanistan, injuring four crew members. The crew was rescued and an air strike called in to destroy the

badly damaged aircraft. Washington did not say where the helicopter crashed.

As the campaign to oust the Taliban continued, the militia executed three supporters of former Afghan deputy foreign minister Hamid Karzai -- believed to be on a mission in southern Afghanistan to encourage Pashtun tribes to turn against the Taliban, AIP reported.

The three were hanged Friday in Deharwad district of Uruzgan province, AIP said quoting unnamed sources.

It added that the whereabouts of Karzai and the rest of his followers was unknown but his family said he was safe.

Karzai is believed to be on a similar mission to Afghan resistance hero Abdul Haq, who the Taliban captured and executed last week along with two associates. Abdul Haq was trying to encourage a rebellion against the Islamic militia.

The Taliban said four US helicopters tried to rescue Karzai on Thursday night but failed after Taliban troops fought them off.

Karzai is close to Afghanistan's exiled former king Zahir Shah, who is the focus of attempts to form a new government if US military operations, launched in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, succeed in ousting the Taliban.



A Marines CH-53 helicopter carrying Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and/or Personnel (TRAP) troops takes off from the flight deck of the USS Peliliu amphibious assault ship in the Arabian Sea on Saturday as part of actions in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Israel's Mossad behind US terror attacks: Saudi paper

AFP, Riyadh

A Saudi newspaper charged Saturday that the Israeli secret service Mossad was behind the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington that killed thousands of people.

The mass-circulation Okaz said in an editorial that an attack on such a scale could not have been carried out with such accuracy and precision without the help of parties inside the United States or with strong links in Washington.

"Six Israelis suspected of involvement in the attacks on New York and Washington were arrested in the US, to be later released. This confirms our strong suspicions about the involvement of Israel's Mossad in the ugly crime," Okaz said.

"If we look carefully into this matter,

we can find no more influential sides in the US than the Israeli Mossad agents, who have the ability to penetrate and the capability to execute with high efficiency," the daily said.

The paper said there was not sufficient evidence that Arabs and Muslims were behind the attacks, but it did not rule out the possibility that Mossad may have recruited some Muslims to carry out the atrocities.

"The main purpose of the conspiracy (attacks) is to undermine ties between Arabs and Muslims, especially moderate states, on the one hand and the US on the other, and to turn the Muslim and Christian civilisations against each other and incite hatred between their adherents," it said.

The positive change in Washington's policy on Middle East

peace and its support for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state confirms that the United States has laid its hands on important leads indicating a direct role by the Mossad in the attacks, the paper asserted.

"We don't think we will wait too long before (the United States) reaches this result. This crime should not pass without knowing its actual masterminds, instead of focusing on 'stupid' tools," Okaz said.

Saudi newspapers often reflect official thinking in Riyadh. The kingdom has accused the pro-Israel lobby in the US of orchestrating a US media campaign against it.

Some 15 of the 19 suspected hijackers of the four planes used in the September 11 attacks are believed to be Saudis.

3 Pak soldiers killed in border clash: India

AFP, Srinagar

Three Pakistani soldiers were killed overnight in an exchange of fire with the Indian army along the disputed Kashmir border, an army spokesman said Saturday.

The firing was reported in the Haji Peer sector of the northern Uri area, 110 kilometers (65 miles) north of Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital, the spokesman said.

"Pakistani troops attacked our positions with heavy-calibre small-arm fire, which was effectively returned by our boys," he said.

"We have seen them carrying three bodies," he said, adding there were no casualties on the Indian side.

The Haji Peer sector on Line of Control (LoC) -- the de facto border dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan -- has seen heavy exchanges of artillery and mortar most of this week which has left an Indian soldier dead and dozen of other people injured, most of them

soldiers.

Also on Friday, the army said it killed 20 Muslim guerrillas who infiltrated under the cover of fire by Pakistani forces.

Tension has increased on the LoC since October 15, when the Indian army launched "punitive" shelling that it said destroyed 11 Pakistani posts and killed 30 Muslim militants.

The head of the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) has warned of escalating tensions along the LoC.

"The situation will become more tense in the coming times, not only along the LoC but also in the whole of Jammu and Kashmir state," UNMOGIP chief Hermann K. Loidolt said Monday.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir, where an armed Muslim insurgency in the Indian zone has claimed at least 35,000 lives since 1989.

Naga rebels urge Delhi to slice off parts of Manipur

AFP, Guwahati

An influential Naga tribal group in India's northeastern region Saturday urged the federal government to slice off parts of Manipur state and merge them into the Nagaland province.

"We want that all Naga-inhabited areas in Manipur be merged with Nagaland immediately as this is our aspiration to live together as one people under a political roof," said Paul Leo, president of the United Naga Council (UNC), the top body of the 500,000 Nagas in Manipur.

"Pending a final political settlement, the Indian government should make an interim arrangement to merge the Naga-dominated areas in Manipur to Nagaland without delay," Leo told AFP.

He said the UNC has submitted a memorandum to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee citing historical reasons to merge four Manipur hill districts --

Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Ukhrul --- with Nagaland.

The group is also asking that Nagaland be given 26 villages in Manipur's Churachandpur, inhabited by the Zeliangrong tribe.

Manipur's majority Meitei community bitterly opposes any move to slice off parts of the state.

"At no cost shall we allow Manipur's territorial integrity to be disturbed. We shall shed blood to resist such a move to fragment Manipur," Ahantem Montu, leader of the All Manipur Students Union (AMSU), told AFP by telephone from the state capital Imphal.

In June, Manipur witnessed violent demonstrations after New Delhi decided to extend a ceasefire with the rebel National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) to affect Naga-dominated parts of Manipur.

The demonstrators feared the move would be the first step toward the creation of a "Greater Nagaland".

No Taliban role in future govt: Vajpayee

AFP, Moscow

A future government in Afghanistan must represent the Afghan people but cannot include the Taliban movement, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said in an interview published here Saturday.

The US-led military operation in Afghanistan "should be aimed at creating a broadly representative government" there, Vajpayee told the Russian daily Ivestia on the eve of his arrival in Moscow for an official visit.

"Such a structure cannot have a place for the Taliban," the Indian leader was quoted as saying by the newspaper.

NSCN kills 4 civilians in Arunachal

AFP, Guwahati

Four civilians, including three women, were killed and three more critically wounded in an ambush by tribal separatists in the north-eastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, police said yesterday.

The spokesman said armed rebels of the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) Friday attacked a car near Nambhai village in Changlang district, 800 KM east of the state capital Itanagar.

Taliban to free French journalist

AFP, Islamabad

The Taliban said Saturday it would release French journalist Michel Peyrard after nearly a month in detention, as the French ambassador to Pakistan left for the Afghanistan border to meet the reporter.

Diplomatic sources said Peyrard, who was detained in Afghanistan with two Pakistani journalists on October 9, was expected to be handed over to the ambassador, Yannick Gerard, at the Torkham border crossing in North West Frontier Province.

Peres, Arafat hold talks

AFP, Formentor

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres met Saturday for the second time in 24 hours at a forum on the Spanish island of Majorca, a Spanish official said.

The two men met in the manager's office at the Hotel Formentor in the presence of the chairman of the Spanish oil company Repsol, Alfonso Cortina, a government spokesman told reporters.

Peres and Arafat are due to take part in round-table discussions later in the day at the forum in the town of Formentor, which is also being attended by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Spanish Prime Minister Jose-Maria Aznar.

Peres and Arafat also met briefly on Friday at a dinner at the forum, although there are no indications so far that any substantive discussions have taken place.

There has been intense diplomatic pressure for the two leaders to get efforts to broker a ceasefire between Israelis and Palestinians going again.

Peres made clear before his arrival in Majorca that he was prepared to meet Arafat but that he would not get involved in negotiations.

Before the Formentor meeting, Peres and Arafat last met at Gaza Airport on September 26 when they agreed a ceasefire which quickly collapsed.

In another development, Israel signalled it will maintain its seige on five self-rule Palestinian West Bank towns Saturday, as troops pushed into new parts of Ramallah where militants had gunned down a young soldier.

There were also faint signs the sides may be steering toward confidence-building measures as Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres met for the second time in 24 hours on the Spanish island of Majorca.

The army confirmed that Palestinian gunmen had opened fire late Friday on a checkpoint guarding the Beit El Jewish settlement in the Ramallah area and killed a 19-year-old soldier and lightly wounded another.



Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres (R) shakes hands with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat during the Euro-Mediterranean forum in Formentor on Saturday. Arafat and Peres met for the second time in 24 hours in an attempt to revive the Middle East peace process.

ABM Treaty 'relic of Cold War': Russia

AFP, Moscow

Russia said Saturday that the 1972 ABM Treaty was a "relic of the Cold War" and stated it wanted to work with the United States to find an arrangement to replace the pact.

"We have been often told in the past that the ABM Treaty is a relic of the Cold War," Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov told reporters at the Kremlin.

"In part, and I repeat in part, I agree with this. But all Russian-US agreements are, to a certain extent, relics of the Cold War," Ivanov said after his US counterpart, Donald Rumsfeld, held talks with President Vladimir Putin.

Ivanov's comments marked the

clearest admission yet from Russia that the landmark Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty may be outdated and in need of replacement and marked a major breakthrough on US-Russian differences over the accord on the eve of Putin summit with US President George W. Bush.

The US president has said he wanted to either scrap or drastically modify the pact in order to go ahead with development of a new anti-missile defence system, but Russia had previously been steadfastly opposed to this.

Rumsfeld restated the official US position on the treaty and said it would be Bush's decision to determine when and if the United States would abandon the treaty.

Anthrax shows its biting teeth in South Asia

AFP, Paris

Alerts over possible anthrax attacks rippled out from the United States Friday, causing new scares in Germany, Greece and South Asia, although some of the reports were unconfirmed and an obviously relieved minister in Berlin said Germany's fears had proved groundless.

"There is no trace of anthrax," a smiling Ulla Schmidt told a news conference late Friday as she released test results from three anthrax scares involving mail in two separate states in the north and east of the country.

She said it was "clear the letters were prepared to cause irritation,"

after a day of concern in Germany as preliminary reports came in from Schleswig-Holstein and Thuringia that the mail was contaminated with anthrax.

In Pakistan, the science and technology minister said Friday that spores of the deadly bacteria had been found at three organisations -- including a major newspaper -- but an official statement later suggested one of the cases could be a hoax.

Attur Rehman told AFP that anthrax had been uncovered at a bank, an unidentified company and the newspaper Jang.

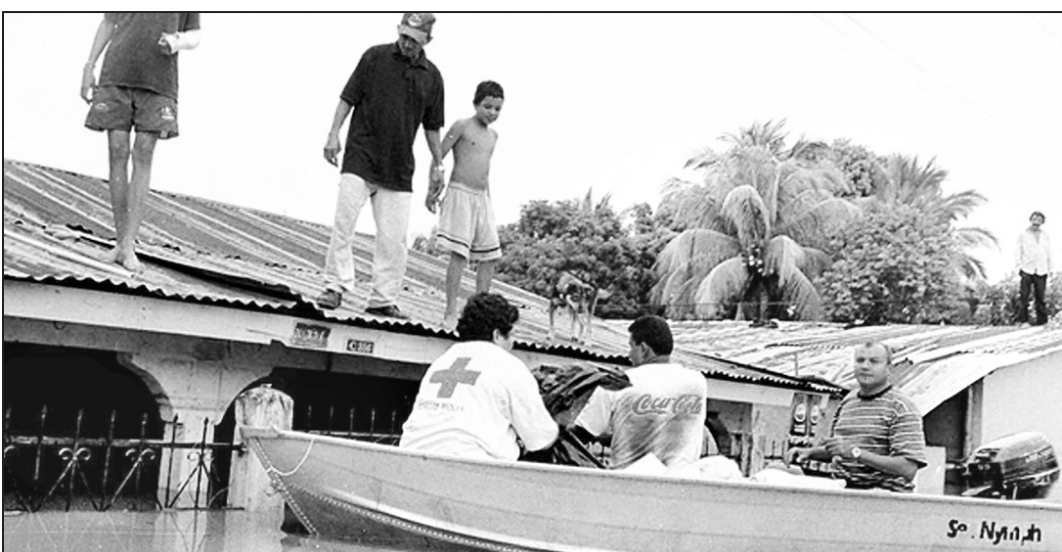
"There were three organisations... these cases have been confirmed but fortunately nobody

has been infected," he said.

"Four people were treated in hospital, but there was no need for alarm. The hospitals have adequate facilities to deal with such cases."

Pakistan is particularly sensitive because of its long border with Afghanistan, where its government is supporting the US-led military campaign sparked by the September 11 attacks in the United States.

In neighbouring India, the deputy chief minister of the western state of Maharashtra said an initial set of lab tests had shown that a letter sent to his office may contain anthrax spores.



Members of the Red Cross assist people left homeless by flooding in La Lima, north of Tegucigalpa, Honduras on Friday. Hurricane Michelle, dumping driving rains that have already claimed at least 10 lives in Central America and left thousands homeless, continued to strengthen on Friday and put Cuba in watch-and-worry mode.

Mira Nair eyes big Hollywood project

AFP, New Delhi

Indian director Mira Nair, whose "Monsoon Wedding" took home the Golden Lion at the Venice film festival, said she had a major Hollywood studio film up her sleeve.

"I hope to direct Hollywood projects and now have six offers from the biggest studios there. Some of them are really good and I will pick one of them," Nair told reporters.

"The warm acceptance with which the American spectators received my earlier films is a great motivation for me to make experiments in Hollywood," she added.

Nair directed "Mississippi

Masala" and "The Perez Family," which used humour to discuss the tribulations of immigrants trying to make a new life in the United States.

Nair said she had also finished filming for "Hysterical Blindness," a story about the US working class.

"The film tells the story of the hardships faced by the American working class in the early 1980s portrayed through various stages of an emotional relationship between a mother and daughter settled in New Jersey," said Nair.

Nair, who divides her time between the United States and India, is in the Indian capital to kick off the worldwide release of "Monsoon Wedding."