

Humanitarian catastrophe even if US stops bombing

AFP, Quetta

Afghanistan is close to a humanitarian disaster in which thousands are likely to die even if the United States calls an immediate halt to its bombing campaign, aid groups fear.

One month into the pounding of a country wracked by severe drought and two decades of war, little progress has been made to get essential food, medicines and warm clothing to the millions on the move.

Red tape, fear of US bombs hitting aid convoys and aid groups' fear of the Taliban militia are hampering humanitarian efforts.

Pakistan and other neighbouring countries are stopping refugees leaving, severely curtailing what relief groups can do.

After the looting of UN offices

and attacks on aid workers, security is a major concern, although the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan on Monday urged UN agencies to return to avoid a disaster.

"Even if the bombing stops now, even if assistance goes in now, it may be too late," UN High Commissioner for Refugees spokesman Yusuf Hassan told AFP.

"Even the toughest, hardest people can't overcome the odds now stacked against them."

Between six and eight million Afghans face food shortages. Disease and the imminent winter compound the severity.

Ahmed Waseem, from the British-based charity Islamic Relief, summed up the frustrations felt by aid groups who are being forced to sit on the sidelines.



PHOTO: AFP
Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee shake hands as they meet in Moscow on Tuesday. Vajpayee left India on Sunday for a trip to Russia, United States and Britain.

Vajpayee holds talks with Putin

Indo-Russian strategic partnership is real

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee hailed their "strategic partnership" on Tuesday in talks aimed at staking out a common position on post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Putin said the meeting proved that "the strategic partnership between Russia and India is real," while Vajpayee noted that in India there was "a political consensus on a special relationship with Russia."

The two countries have "practically identical positions" on the fight against terrorism, to be consolidated later in the day in a joint statement, Putin noted as the talks widened to include senior government ministers.

Vajpayee said the two countries had "common geostrategic interests, both wanting to see a peaceful Asia free from terrorism and extremism."

He praised Putin for his visit to New Delhi in October last year which "opened the dialogue with India and prepared our declaration on a strategic partnership."

The day's agenda was due to focus on the situation in Afghanistan and the US-led international anti-terrorist campaign but included a substantial economic component, including a framework agreement paving the way for Russia's construction of a nuclear power plant in southern India.

Moscow and New Delhi have "identical" positions on the issue of terrorism, the presidential chief of staff Sergei Prihodko told the ITAR-TASS news agency as the talks opened.

The two capitals have both supported the US-led military action against Afghanistan.

Both are interested in seeing the creation of a post-Taliban government in Kabul that would favour their regional interests, which means if possible limiting the influence of India's arch-rival Pakistan.

In recent weeks, India has aggressively staked its claim for a say in the post-Taliban set-up, announcing 100 million dollars in humanitarian aid, appointing a special envoy for Afghanistan, and admitting that New Delhi was helping the opposition coalition with weapons in its fight against the hardline Taliban.

Among the 10 texts to be signed after the talks are a joint statement on international terrorism and another on strategic stability, Prihodko said.

Putin and Vajpayee will also sign a joint statement "in which questions of economic, trade international and other fields of cooperation will be laid down", the official added.

Among the economic projects under discussion is the construction of the Kudankulam plant, in the state of Tamil Nadu, which was initially agreed some 13 years ago but abandoned following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Anti-Taliban forces capture key district

AFP, Islamabad

Afghan opposition fighters claimed a new victory Tuesday in their drive towards the key northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif as the US more than doubled its ground troops.

A spokesman for opposition commander Atta Mohammad said his forces took complete control of Zari district, 70 km southwest of Mazar-i-Sharif, from the ruling Taliban militia at dawn after an all-night battle.

Zari is just west of Aq-Kupruk, where fighting has also raged this week as the opposition Northern Alliance tries to press toward Taliban-held Mazar-i-Sharif, the capital of Balkh province.

"At around dawn this morning we were able to capture it completely," said opposition spokesman Qari Qudratullah. "Now it is calm, there is no movement from the Taliban side."

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced late Monday that the United States had more than doubled the number of its ground troops deployed in Afghanistan and was ready to send in even more soldiers as it turns up the heat on the Taliban and its allies.

"We've gone two and a half times above what we had and we're now, instead of two locations, we're now in four and maybe more," Rumsfeld told reporters as he flew back home from India.

He said the US military was ready to boost the number of special forces on Afghan territory three or four times from its initial size, but was unable to ship that many people in just a couple of days.

"That will accrue to our advantage over the coming period," said the secretary of defence, who did not reveal any specific numbers.

US B-52 bombers and strike aircraft have been hammering Taliban positions in northeastern Afghanistan where the Northern Alliance are fighting for control of supply routes into neighbouring Tajikistan ahead of winter.

American planes have also hit at Taliban forces dug in about 50 km north of Kabul. A B-52 made four

runs Monday over the Taliban entrenched on a hill that dominates the western skyline of the Shomali valley.

Despite signs to the contrary, the opposition alliance said it was ready to advance on Kabul.

"We are ready, but it all depends on our strategy and the circumstances," General Mohammad Qasim Fahim said after exercises in the opposition stronghold of Jabal Saraj.

"These military exercises show we have reached the highest level of preparedness," said Fahim, successor to assassinated commander Ahmed Shah Masood, killed two days before September 11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon blamed by Washington on bin Laden.

3 killed in Indo-Pak cross-border fire

AFP, Srinagar

One Indian and two Pakistani troopers were killed in overnight exchanges of mortar and rocket fire over the disputed border in Kashmir, officials said Tuesday.

"On Monday evening Pakistani army fired mortars, rockets and heavy calibre small arms from their Karachi Post in Lipa Valley sector on Indian positions in the Tangdhar sector," an army press release said.

An Indian soldier was killed and another was injured in the "unprovoked" Pakistani firing, the release said.

The army statement said the

Indian army "in the exercise of its right to take appropriate action carried out retaliatory engagements in Hajjpeer and Tangdhar sectors."

Two Pakistani soldiers were killed in the firing, the statement said.

There have been frequent exchanges of fire between India and Pakistan during the past week in the Tangdhar sector, in the northern Kashmiri district of Kupwara.

The fresh skirmishes came after Indian army and paramilitary border guards were put on alert after Pakistan moved men and munitions closer to the border, Indian officials said.



PHOTO: AFP
The wreckage of a car that exploded in central Madrid rests between trees on Tuesday. Five people were wounded, two seriously, when the car bomb exploded in the Prosperidad residential neighbourhood.

Russian military won't act

AP, New York

Russian intelligence services routinely exchange information with the United States in the new war against terrorism, but Moscow will not play a military role, an aide to the Russian president said.

Sergei Yastrzhembsky said Monday that the two former Cold War enemies are sharing information on a broad spectrum, not just on a case-by-case basis as before the September 11 terror attacks on New York and the Pentagon.

Nevertheless, Yastrzhembsky said, "Military participation is fully excluded."

Yastrzhembsky said that Washington, before it fell victim to massive terrorism, ignored Russian intelligence that showed ties between separatist rebels fighting Russian control of Chechnya and the al-Qaida terrorist network of Osama bin Laden.

The United States holds him responsible for the attacks on New York and Washington that took thousands of lives nearly two

months ago.

"We had such information, but unfortunately our partners in the West did not pay it serious enough attention before September 11," said Yastrzhembsky, speaking at the Russian consulate.

The United States now accepts Russian claims that Chechen rebels receive aid from al-Qaida. Yastrzhembsky said the Kremlin is grateful for the change in policy "even though it was late."

Arthur C. Clarke vows never to leave Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Science fiction guru, Arthur C. Clarke, has vowed never to leave his adopted home Sri Lanka despite being the guest of honour at a dinner by space enthusiasts at the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles.

Clarke, 83, will not attend the gala due to be held on November 15 as he is now confined to a wheelchair at his home in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, his office said Tuesday.

"I feel delighted and honoured by this event, and am only sorry that I cannot be at the gala in person," Clarke said. "I am now completely wheel-chair bound owing to Post Polio syndrome and am very limited in time and energy."

Nepal, Bhutan begin talks on refugee problem

AFP, Kathmandu

The foreign secretaries of Nepal and Bhutan Tuesday began a two-day meeting to discuss the repatriation of over 100,000 Bhutanese citizens living in refugee camps in Nepal, officials said.

More than 100,000 Bhutanese of Nepalese descent have been sheltered in eight United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) camps in southeastern Nepal since 1990.

They fled Bhutan after rulers imposed harsh anti-Hindu cultural reforms. Anyone who failed to follow the new rules faced severe intimidation.

US seeks German aid

AFP, Berlin

The United States has made a specific request for German military assistance in its campaign against Afghanistan, a deputy from Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's Social Democratic Party (SPD) said Tuesday.

Hermann Scheer told Berlin's InfoRadio that Berlin had received the first specific request from the United States for the assistance of Germany's Bundeswehr military since the beginning of the US-led bombing on October 7.

But he said that as of Monday, Berlin did not have a point-by-point wish list from Washington.

"As far as I know, the government did not yet know yesterday exactly what the details are," Scheer said.

"(The government) knew it was coming but not what it included. That is why it cannot be given a detailed evaluation yet."

Several German newspapers reported Tuesday that the German government had received a call for assistance from Washington.

Anthrax hits Pentagon

REUTERS, Washington

Anthrax turned up in a Pentagon post office and authorities delayed using a potent gas to decontaminate a Senate office building yesterday, while scientists unveiled a DNA test that could speed the detection of the dangerous germ warfare bacterium.

Hospital worker and Vietnamese immigrant Kathy Nguyen, the fourth person to die of anthrax since Oct. 5, was mourned in a funeral service in New York City as authorities remained baffled about how she contracted the

disease.

But Norma Wallace, a New Jersey postal worker who beat the most deadly form of anthrax, offered words of encouragement as she checked out of a hospital. A State Department employee still hospitalised in Virginia with inhalation anthrax made sufficient improvement to be taken out of intensive care.

A spate of letters laced with powdery anthrax spores has been sent by unknown perpetrators through the US mail since the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

Lankan opposition offers talks to end bloodshed

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main opposition Tuesday renewed its offer of talks with all political groups, including the Tamil Tiger rebels, in a bid to end ethnic bloodshed if it is elected in next month's elections.

Opposition leader and former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said his United National Party (UNP) was committed to a negotiated political settlement to the drawn-out separatist conflict, which has claimed over 60,000 lives over the past 30 years.

"We will discuss with all political parties, the clergy and civil society to agree on a broad political settlement," Wickremesinghe said in his manifesto. "Talks will include the Tamil Tigers."

The UNP said it was proposing an interim administration for a "brief period" in the island's embattled northern and eastern regions, where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are fighting for an independent homeland.

The party was also offering a commission to look into the grievances of hundreds of thousands of people displaced within the country due to the conflict.

There would be no constitutional reforms until a comprehensive agreement on the devolution of power was reached.

The party also proposed the modernisation of the country's armed forces and better training and equipment for the security

forces and the police, in its manifesto for the December 5 election.

The UNP said it was criticised by President Chandrika Kumaratunga when it proposed during the 1999 presidential election campaign a two-year interim administration in embattled regions.

However the UNP manifesto said the president had herself proposed a 10-year period for an interim administration and accused her government of "double speak and duplicity."

"The president tells the international audience that she wants to talk to the Tigers, but at home she is accusing us of a pact with the LTTE to discredit us in the eyes of the (majority) Sinhalese voters," UNP spokesman W.J.M. Lokubandara told reporters here.

Switzerland to provide legal help in Benazir's case

AP, Geneva

Switzerland can give Pakistan further legal help in a new anti-corruption case against former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, the Swiss Supreme Court ruled Monday.

The ruling clears the way for Swiss authorities to give Pakistan banking documents of "off-shore" companies controlled or otherwise linked to Benazir and her family.

Switzerland previously gave

Pakistan other documents for use in the prosecution of Benazir and her family. The former prime minister has already been found guilty in two Pakistani trials, one in her absence.

In upholding a lower court Monday, Switzerland's Federal Tribunal rejected arguments from the companies that the Bhutto family were unable to obtain a fair trial in Pakistan because of the government installed in a 1999 military coup.

Laden's death won't halt terror attacks: Straw

AFP, London

Capturing or killing Osama bin Laden will not prevent his Al-Qaeda network launching fresh terrorist attacks, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw warned Tuesday.

Straw told The Times newspaper that he believed cells operating under Al-Qaeda's umbrella would continue for a period even if the network, blamed for the September 11 terrorist attacks in

the United States, was destroyed in Afghanistan.

Bin Laden, the dissident Saudi-born extremist being harboured by Afghanistan's ruling Taliban regime, "will get caught in the end," Straw told The Times.

The Foreign Secretary compared the cult of personality built around the Al-Qaeda chief with that which developed around Adolf Hitler, describing it as "similar to the Nazi phenomenon".

Sharon, Peres put together new peace plan to end crisis

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres are putting together a new plan to break the deadlock in the Middle East crisis, the Israeli press reported Tuesday, after Peres held yet another meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Sharon, a right-wing former general opposed to "negotiating under fire", and Peres, dovish

Labour leader who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Arafat, met Sunday to discuss a peace plan Peres had been preparing, the reports said.

The daily Haaretz said Peres' draft plan featured a ceasefire, negotiations with the Palestinians based on UN resolutions calling for an Israeli pull-out from land seized in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

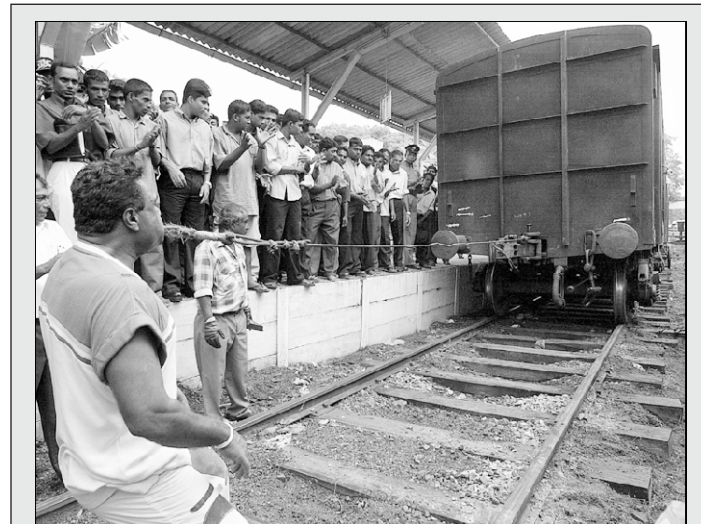


PHOTO: AFP
Mighty teeth
Sri Lankan man Gamini Wasantha Kumara, 39, pulls two cargo wagons weighing 40 tonnes with his teeth on Tuesday at the main railway station in the capital. Kumara is hoping to be able to make an endurance record of two-hour pulling the compartments over one kilometre.

US raids double-edged sword for Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

A month into the US military offensive in Afghanistan, neighbouring Pakistan is reaping the rewards for helping stage the operation but fears it could end up paying an unexpectedly high price.

Clearly, the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States has provided diplomatic lustre to the former pariah state once shunned for its nuclear tests and October 1999 military coup.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has seen concrete results from his unequivocal decision to sign up for the American drive to root out terrorism and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The move earned him a lifting of sanctions imposed on Pakistan for its nuclear weapons program, a

rescheduling of the country's debt and a flock of world leaders trooping to his doorstep.

In the coming days, Musharraf will be meeting with US President George W. Bush in New York and French President Jacques Chirac in Paris.

Among those trekking to Islamabad were British Prime Minister Tony Blair, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, three European Union ministers, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and a host of foreign ministers from France to Saudi Arabia.

This windfall has been hailed by businessmen here who see renewed prospects for boosting the country's exports and easing its debt burden. As one diplomat said,

it marks a "return to the grown-ups table" for Pakistan.

But the Pakistani gambit also carries its share of risk.

The Islamic republic is home to several radical movements that feel closer to their Afghan neighbours -- often coming from the same ethnic groups -- than they do to the American "infidels".

Several thousand fighters from the Pashtun tribes in Pakistan's west and northwest have crossed over into Afghanistan to wage "jihad," or holy war, against the Americans alongside their Taliban brothers.

Tens of thousands of Pakistanis have also taken to the streets of major cities to burn US flags and effigies of Bush, denounce the airstrikes and accuse Musharraf of having "sold out Islam for a few dollars."

The protests have so far been kept under control. But the US vow to pursue its offensive over the long haul and its plan to continue bombing through the Muslim holy month of Ramadan could fuel anger here and complicate Islamabad's situation.

The struggling US effort to capture terror suspect Osama bin Laden or bring down his Taliban protectors also worries the Pakistanis, who fear Washington may end up backing the only opposition forces on the ground -- those of the Northern Alliance.

Pakistan is a vehement opponent of the Northern Alliance, a loose coalition of assorted Afghan ethnic minorities, and prefers that any post-Taliban government in Kabul include plenty of Pashtun representation.