

UN asks Afghan factions to hold talks for forming govt

AP, United Nations

Facing a power vacuum in Afghanistan with the Taliban on the run, the United Nations urged Afghan groups to meet "as early as humanly possible" about forming a transitional government backed by an international force.

As northern Alliance soldiers replaced fleeing Taliban forces in the Afghan capital of Kabul, the UN Security Council met Tuesday to hear recommendations from Lakhdar Brahimi, the chief UN envoy for Afghanistan, for a post-Taliban government administered by Afghans.

"Time is now of the essence," Brahimi said. "It is indispensable and urgent that various Afghan groups be brought into the single process. The challenge of Afghanistan is going to be the creation of good government."

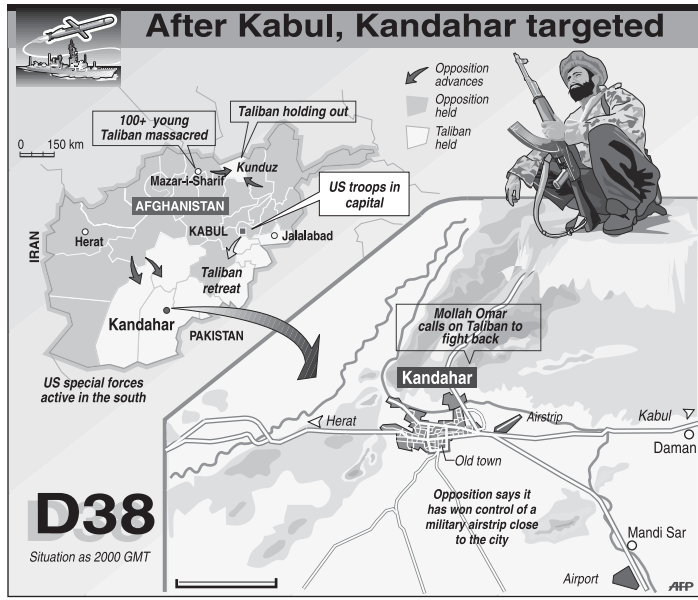
Brahimi, who recently returned from visiting Afghan exile groups in Pakistan and Iran, said the Northern Alliance and representatives of various Afghan groups should meet "as early as humanly possible" to work toward forming a broad-based transitional administration.

The veteran Algerian diplomat did not say where such a meeting might be held, but the United States is pushing for the United Arab Emirates.

The international community wants the United Nations to play a key role in overseeing a political settlement and rebuilding the war-shattered country, and Brahimi has been charged with the tough job of trying to get the disparate Afghan groups together.

A draft Security Council resolution circulated by Britain Tuesday night affirms that "the United Nations should play a central role in supporting the efforts of the Afghan people to establish urgently" a broad-based, multi-ethnic transitional government representing all the Afghan people.

The proposed resolution, expected to be adopted later this week, "encourages member states to support efforts to ensure the safety and security of areas of Afghanistan no longer under Taliban control, and in particular to



ensure respect for Kabul as the capital for all the Afghan people. The council was to meet Wednesday to discuss the resolution and Brahimi's step-by-step plan for a transitional government to replace the Taliban, which is harbouring Osama bin Laden, prime suspect in the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

Bush, Putin vow deep N-arms cut

AFP, Washington

Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin head for their next meeting in Texas Wednesday, after seeing eye to eye on deep cuts in the US nuclear arsenal but failing to come closer on missile defence.

"We intend to dismantle conclusively the vestiges of the Cold War and to develop (an) entirely new partnership for (the) long term," Russian President Putin said at a joint press conference on the first day of a three-day summit.

"This is a new day in the long history of Russian-American relations, a day of progress and a day of hope," said Bush. "We're transforming our relationship from one of hostility and suspicion to one based on cooperation and trust."

Bush had made the day's most dramatic announcement when he told the Putin at the White House that he would cut the US nuclear arsenal by two-thirds over the next 10 years to between 1,700-2,200 intercontinental warheads.

"The current levels of our nuclear forces do not reflect today's strategic realities," said Bush, who came to office vowing unilateral cuts. The new level will be "fully consistent with American security."

The decision drew a warm response from the Russian leader.



US President George W. Bush (R) and Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) hold a joint press conference in the East Room of the White House in Washington, DC on Tuesday. Bush and Putin said that they had not yet reached a deal on the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty that forbids Bush's planned missile shield but added that they would keep talking.

Laden, Omar to be put on trial

AFP, Abu Dhabi

Chief terror suspect Osama bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar will be put on trial if they are captured, Afghan opposition Northern Alliance Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah said Wednesday.

"They both have committed many crimes against the Afghan people and massacred innocent civilians in Afghanistan," he told Abu Dhabi satellite television.

"We consider them as war criminals, and they must be brought to court and tried," Abdullah said in an interview from Kabul after Alliance forces took control of the capital following the flight of the Taliban Islamic militia on Tuesday.

"They carried out massacres in

Kabul and other regions of the country, and I myself saw houses and villages destroyed and civilians chased out of their homes," he said.

Abdullah added that he had also seen "innocent civilians gathered in tents against the biting cold, and all that is called terror."

The minister went on to say "the United Nations has a crucial role to play in the framework of negotiations and the process of reconstructing the country."

"The United Nations will have to play the most important role to restore peace in the country and to guarantee, as an observer, the staffing of general elections in Afghanistan."

But he added that following "the defeat of the Taliban and terrorists,

there will be no more war and, consequently, there will be no need of an international peace force."

The United Nations on Tuesday spelled out a five-point political plan for Afghanistan and urged donors to support the country's reconstruction.

Lakhdar Brahimi, Secretary General Kofi Annan's special representative on Afghanistan, told the Security Council a senior UN official is due to go to Kabul "immediately security conditions permit".

Brahimi said UN staff who left Afghanistan before the United States launched its air war against the ruling Taliban on October 7 would start returning soon, but he advised against sending UN peacekeepers.

Afghan refugee crisis remains acute: UN

AFP, Quetta

International aid groups said Wednesday there was still a refugee crisis in Afghanistan despite the battlefield victories of the Northern Alliance.

They said concerns about factionalisation and security under the Northern Alliance were hampering work.

UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) spokesman Gordon Weiss said the challenges remained the same despite the alliance's substantial territorial gains.

6 die of burns as India marks Diwali

AFP, New Delhi

Six people burned to death Wednesday when a shop selling firecrackers caught fire while doing brisk business during the Hindu festival of lights in northern India, a report said.

The Press Trust of India said four of the victims in the town of Batala were children, and that two more shoppers were hospitalised with severe burns.

Hindus traditionally let off firecrackers to celebrate the annual religious festival of Diwali.

Zahir Shah to return home soon

AFP, Rome

Afghanistan's former king Mohammed Zahir Shah said he will return home very shortly, not as a monarch but to serve his country, in a formal message to be broadcast Wednesday that will urge Afghans to "avoid vengeance."

"It will be a message to the Afghan nation, on the eve of Ramadan," said the ex-king's spokesman Yousouf Nouristan.

An Italian translation was printed Wednesday in the daily La Repubblica, but the official statement, recorded in English and in

Pashto, one of Afghanistan's two main languages, will be broadcast later in the day by CNN, BBC, Voice of America and Afghan radio, the spokesman said.

He did not elaborate, state any time for the broadcast, nor when the 87-year-old ex-monarch, who lives in exile in Rome and has been the focus of international efforts to form a broad-based post-Taliban government in Kabul, might return to Afghanistan.

The following is an unofficial translation of the full text as it appeared in La Repubblica:
My dear sons,

Blair calls for aid push in Afghanistan

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair called Wednesday for a major push to get humanitarian aid into Afghanistan after the collapse of the Taliban regime.

"We have to make a particular push now on the humanitarian side," he said. "This will be very, very important indeed."

The prime minister, at a Downing Street news conference after meeting his Portuguese counterpart Antonio Guterres, said the UN World Food Programme was trying to get aid in.

"We need to make sure that it is distributed to the people who really need it. This is a big humanitarian challenge and we need to rise to it."

While welcoming the collapse of the Taliban regime, Blair stressed the need for a broad-based govern-

ment to take over. He said talks on a new administration needed to involve all the ethnic groups and include as many people as possible in building a government for the future.

He added: "It is also right that the United Nations takes the lead in this and everyone co-operates in the process for a stable and viable future."

Blair said that while Taliban forces were "in a state of collapse," the objectives of the US-led campaign had not yet been fulfilled, notably over the fate of Osama bin Laden, chief suspect for the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

"Afghanistan should not be used to export terrorism around the world. The al-Qaeda network should be shut down and Osama bin Laden brought to justice."

Options running out for Bin Laden

AFP, Kabul

With Kabul taken and the Taliban in total disarray, the noose may finally be tightening around the elusive figure of Osama bin Laden -- prime target of the US military campaign in Afghanistan.

But if bin Laden is running out of space to hide, his precise whereabouts remain as much of a mystery as when the United States launched the largest and most expensive manhunt in history.

The last confirmed sighting of the Saudi-born dissident was by Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir, who interviewed him a week ago after a day of being shuttled around in jeeps, often blindfolded.

The 44-year-old bin Laden is believed to live constantly on the move to avoid capture and reportedly shuttles from cave to cave.

Following the fall of Kabul to the

Northern Alliance on Tuesday, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said it was likely that bin Laden and top members of his al-Qaeda network were in the southern Taliban stronghold around Kandahar.

"They are more confined than they were," Straw said, while adding a strong note of caution.

"The al-Qaeda organisation are down, but they may well not be out," Straw said in a UN Security Council debate on the political future of Afghanistan.

"We do have to ensure that they are wholly defeated."

The Taliban's refusal to hand over bin Laden triggered the US-led air strikes on Afghanistan, which allowed the opposition Northern Alliance to overrun vast swathes of territory formerly held by the militia.

US asks India, Pakistan to recast their relations

AFP, Washington

The United States called on India and Pakistan Tuesday to exploit the new security environment in South Asia emerging from the US-led war on terror to recast their antagonistic relations.

Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca said that the aftermath of terror attacks September 11 on New York and the Pentagon presented the two arch-rivals with an opportunity.

"Although the dramatic events of September 11 have inspired greater cooperation among many nations,

unfortunately this sentiment has not yet taken hold in Indo-Pakistani relations.

"Tensions between the two remain high and clearly both nations are eyeing US cooperation with their neighbour with some doubts," she said in a speech to the Asia Society.

Rocca said Pakistan's decision to endorse the US war against the Taliban, protectors of Osama bin Laden, which it had previously supported, represented a new dimension for Indo-Pakistani relations.

India has accused the Taliban of tolerating terrorist camps used to

train Islamic militants sent to join a separatist fight in Indian Kashmir.

"The changes wrought on the world by the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania have brought a fundamental change in Pakistan's policy with regard to the Taliban," Rocca said.

"This change of policy raises new possibilities for recasting Indo-Pakistani relations and reducing tensions. We hope that this historic opportunity to bring peace to the region is not missed."

Women relish fall of Taliban

AFP, Kabul

The women of Kabul reacted cautiously Wednesday to the fall of the Taliban after five years in which a repressive Islamic regime had denied them basic rights of education, employment and even dress.

Forced behind the veil, sequestered in their homes and banned from the classroom and the workplace because of the Taliban's radical interpretation of Islamic law, Afghan women remained an all but invisible presence Wednesday on the streets of Kabul.

In stark contrast to the high-

spirited pranks of their menfolk, some of whom chucked Taliban-style turbans in the gutter, or hurried to the barber to cut off their beards, the few women in evidence continued to wear a burqa veiling their faces.

Yet the long-awaited emancipation of Afghan women provided one of the most poignant and symbolic moments of Tuesday's dramatic turnaround as two female broadcasters read the first news bulletin on Radio Afghanistan, back on air after five years.

"We are free again, and now that the Taliban have gone we can look

forward to a better life, but you cannot expect us suddenly after so many years of cruelty to throw off our burqas," Jamila Asyaat told AFP outside the defence ministry.

"For too long we have been locked away, forbidden to work or even to go to school, made to wear these clothes, and now it is time for us to begin to live again," she added.

The opposition Northern Alliance which captured Kabul on Tuesday, has pledged to overturn the Islamic militia's ban on women in education and the workplace.

Grenade attack on minister's function in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Separatist Muslim militants Wednesday fired rifle grenades at a function attended by a senior minister in Indian-Kashmir, police and witnesses said.

Militants fired three grenades towards a private school in Srinagar, where Kashmir's works minister, Ali Mohammad Sagar, was the chief guest at an annual day event, they said.

"The function was going on in the lawns of the school when we heard two explosions," Idrees Ahmed, an eye-witness said.

Korean talks collapse

AFP, Seoul

Inter-Korean peace talks collapsed Wednesday after North Korean protests against a security alert imposed in the South following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

The breakdown dashed hopes for new reunions of families separated by the Korean War five decades ago, and for progress on economic cooperation.

The two sides broke up without setting a date and venue for future meetings, casting a dark cloud over South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" of engaging the Stalinist North.

Kashmiris watch fall of Taliban amid disbelief

AFP, Srinagar

The fall of Kabul to the Northern Alliance evoked both relief and disbelief Wednesday in Kashmir, India's insurgency-wracked Muslim majority state.

"I don't believe Taliban forces have left Kabul without any resistance," said Aasiya Andrabi, head of leading female separatist group, Dukhtar-e-Milat or Daughters of Faith.

Northern Alliance forces entered the Afghanistan capital early Tuesday after the Taliban fled without a fight.

Andrabi has been a vociferous supporter of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect in the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

"Maybe they have retreated under some war strategy, which only time will tell," she added.

Andrabi said it was painful for her to hear about the fall of Kabul to Northern Alliance forces "who have started killing fellow Muslims there".

The September 11 attacks on the US, Washington's subsequent formation of an international coalition against terrorism and its military action in Afghanistan have divided separatist leaders and Muslim radicals in Kashmir.

The radicals, who are in the minority, were angered by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's decision to cooperate with the US.

But the influential All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), an amalgam of two dozen separatist parties, advised Kashmiris not to be swayed by emotion and termed Musharraf's stance towards Washington as "pragmatic and realistic".



Pakistan president Pervez Musharraf (L) speaks during his joint press conference with Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit in Istanbul on Tuesday.

Cholera kills more than 250 in Nigerian city

AFP, Lagos

More than 250 people have died in a cholera epidemic which has swept the northern Nigerian city of Kano in the past week, hospital sources said Wednesday.

"Going by the records at the Kano Infectious Diseases Hospital, more than 250 people have died," a member of the hospital staff told AFP by telephone.

The staff member, who asked not to be named, said around 500 people have been hospitalised for treatment.

He urged the government to embark on enlightenment campaigns to stem the spread of the highly contagious disease.

Press reports here Wednesday and Punch papers, at least 400 people have been killed in Kano in the past week.

The papers said the victims included a senior police officer, Inuwa Jikamsi, who died on Sunday night after taking a meal believed to have been contaminated.

He died vomiting, they said. State authorities have officially said only eight people have died in the epidemic and another 240 hospitalised.

State Health Commissioner Mansur Kabir said the government has sought the assistance of the World Health Organisation and UNICEF to stem the epidemic.

"We wrote the letters on Tuesday seeking for their assistance on drugs and logistics," he said.

Bush allows trials of terror suspects in military court

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush signed an order late Tuesday that would allow for non-US suspected terrorists to be tried before a special military panel instead of in civilian courts, the White House said.

"He signed a military order today which gives him an additional tool in fighting the war against terrorism and bringing terrorists to justice," said spokeswoman Anne Womack.

The order gives Bush the power to direct US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to set up a military commission to try non-US terror suspects.

The order said "any individual who is not a United States citizen" that is or was a member of Saudi-born suspected terror mastermind Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, has engaged in or conspired to commit acts of terrorism or

harbored any such suspects would be subject to the rule.

It said such individuals had to be detained and tried by military tribunals so that the United States could ensure the security of both its citizens and those in countries committed to Washington's global war on terrorism.

The president has been calling for enhanced law-enforcement powers since September 11 terror strikes on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which Washington blames on bin Laden.

"It may be very difficult to try a terrorist of high prominence, say, someone like Osama bin Laden, in a regular civilian court in the United States and ensure the safety of people associated with the trial," said a Bush administration official who requested anonymity.