

8 foreign aid workers freed

AFP, Islamabad

Eight Western aid workers held for three months by the Taliban for preaching Christianity were celebrating their freedom here on Thursday after anti-Taliban fighters broke them out of prison in Afghanistan and US military helicopters flew them to Pakistan.

The two Americans, two Australians and four Germans, employees of the German charity Shelter Now International, were picked up by three US Special Forces helicopters overnight from a field south of the Afghan capital Kabul.

They were flown Thursday morning to the Chaklala air base near Islamabad where they were met by diplomats from their respective embassies.

US President George W. Bush, Australian and German officials and relatives welcomed the end of their captivity, which began on August 3 when they were arrested on charges of seeking to convert Muslims to Christianity.

Under the Taliban's hardline brand of Islamic law, the eight aid workers, who were detained along with 16 Afghan colleagues, could have faced the death penalty if convicted of seeking to convert Muslims to Christianity.

Their trial was interrupted by the US bombing of Afghanistan which began October 7 in retaliation for the Taliban refusal to hand over alleged terrorist Osama bin Laden.

The 16 Afghan employees of Shelter Now were also safe on Thursday after breaking out of Poli Charki prison in central Kabul, one of them said.

Mohammad Nazir, 42, told AFP in Kabul that he and his 15 colleagues broke out of the jail late Monday as the Taliban fled the capital under pressure from the advancing forces of the opposition Northern Alliance.



SOURCE: AFP

Suicide bombing kills 3 in eastern Sri Lanka

AFP, Colombo

A suspected Tamil Tiger suicide bomber carried out an attack in eastern Sri Lanka Thursday killing himself and two others, police said.

The bomber, targeting members of the security forces in the town of Batticaloa, also seriously injured six others, police said.

In another attack carried out by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), two soldiers on road-clearing patrol were killed in the northeastern district of Trincomalee on Thursday, local officials said.

Last week, a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber jumped in front of a police vehicle in the eastern province and detonated explosives, but missed his target.

Suicide bombing is a trade mark of Tamil Tiger guerrillas who are fighting for an independent homeland in the island's northeast.

Gunmen hijack plane with 12 people on board

AFP, Georgetown

Four gunmen hijacked a small passenger plane and forced it to take them across the border to Brazil, where they got off before sending the plane aloft with its 12 passengers and crew unharmed.

"The pilot felt the nozzle of a gun at the back of his head just after departure and the person who was occupying the co-pilot's seat was accosted in a similar fashion with a gun to the head," Trans Guyana Aviation director Roy Jainandan told reporters here late Wednesday.

"And the other two hijackers," Jainandan added, "they were armed as well and they tied up the passengers."

7 Filipino Abu Sayyaf hostages rescued

AFP, Zamboanga

Government troops have recovered seven Filipinos held hostage by the Abu Sayyaf, leaving an American Christian missionary couple and one Filipino in the hands of the Muslim guerrilla group, officials said.

Three Filipinos were rescued earlier Thursday, while four Filipino farm workers were abandoned late Wednesday by Abu Sayyaf guerrillas in the town of Maluso and recovered hours later, officials said.

The Filipinos were identified as tourists Agie Montealegre and Maria Fe Rosadeno, and hospital worker Sheila Tabunyang. But the identities of the male hostages were not yet known, military officials said.

Montealegre and Rosadeno were among 20 people seized by the Abu Sayyaf in a raid on the luxury resort island of Dos Palmas on May 27.

Pak border on Laden alert

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has ordered a special watch on its border with Afghanistan in case terrorist suspect Osama bin Laden tries to slip across, officials said Thursday.

With pressure mounting on the Taliban headquarters in the southern Afghan province of Kandahar, next to the Pakistan border, a top Pakistan government official said troops were on a special "Osama" alert.

"The government is aware of all possibilities and is taking all possi-

bilities into account," the official, who requested anonymity, told AFP.

"Civil armed forces on the western borders in North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan borders have been put on red alert against any threat" of bin Laden getting into Pakistan.

"We have also redeployed forces to cover unfrequented routes. We have taken all measures that are necessary to ward off such a threat," he added.

Taliban spokesmen have regularly insisted that Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, and his

ally bin Laden, the Saudi dissident accused of masterminding the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, are alive and still in Afghanistan.

The fate of Kandahar, where Omar's residence has been destroyed in US bombing strikes that started on October 7, remains unclear however.

Northern Alliance and independent local commanders are taking over Taliban territory closer and closer to the city.

Vajpayee for rejoicing Taliban fall

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee Thursday urged the world to rejoice in the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan and said terrorism, whether in the United States or Kashmir, stemmed from religious intolerance.

He also called on the international community to further strengthen the global coalition against terrorism to help seek out those who masterminded terror attacks across the world.

"All of us can rejoice in the current defeat of the Taliban in city after city in Afghanistan, a defeat which shows that the Afghan people's long-awaited journey from darkness to light has begun," Vajpayee told a world religious congress in New Delhi.

"Many of us send our best wishes and generous assistance to our brethren in Afghanistan for taking this victorious journey forward to early reconstruction and lasting peace," Vajpayee said.

The Indian leader compared the capture of Kabul and other key

Afghan cities by the Northern Alliance with Wednesday's annual Hindu festival of Diwali which symbolises the victory of good over evil.

New Delhi, which enjoys a warm relationship with the Northern Alliance is an ally in the US-led coalition against terrorism.

Vajpayee, speaking to religious figures including Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama and Western diplomats, said the international community should not let down its guard.

Laden, Omar vow fight to death

AFP, Kabul

Osama bin Laden has vowed to die rather than be handed over to the United States, a Taliban official said Thursday as US forces stepped up the hunt for the world's most wanted man in Afghanistan.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld highlighted fears that bin Laden, the accused mastermind of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, would try to flee the country as Taliban forces are forced to retreat.

And Pakistan has tightened its watch on the Afghan border in case the multi-millionaire creator of the al-Qaeda network tries to find a new hiding place outside of Afghanistan.

But Taliban spokesman Mullah Abdullah said "America can never arrest Osama bin Laden alive," the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press reported.

"Osama has decided that death is better than being handed over to the Americans. He prefers death,"

said the spokesman.

Abdullah dismissed rumours he said came from America that bin Laden has been arrested. "This morning at 9:00 am I contacted my headquarters in Kandahar and there is no report about Osama bin Laden, and they strongly denied this rumour."

But there is a greater sense of desperation in comments from bin Laden and Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar.

Omar also said his movement preferred death to taking part in what would be an evil government in Kabul, which is now in the hands of the Northern Alliance. Omar warned of a "big" plan to destroy the United States in the interview with BBC radio.

Bin Laden, who is said to live constantly on the move to avoid capture and reportedly often shuttles from cave to cave, has often said he is ready to die for his anti-US cause.

According to Hamid Mir, a



Pakistani newspaper editor who interviewed bin Laden last week, the accused terrorist leader is certain the Americans will eventually kill him.

Mir recounted: "He told me, 'I am ready to die.' He said, 'I know that they can bomb this place also. They

are not aware that I am present here. But they are dropping bombs blindly everywhere. So I may get killed even with you."

"My cause will continue after my death," he quoted bin Laden as saying. "They think they will solve this problem by killing me. It's not easy to solve this problem. This war has been spread all over the world."

Pakistan has ordered a "bin Laden" alert on its border. "The government is aware of all possibilities and is taking all possibilities into account," a top government official, who requested anonymity, told AFP.

"Civil armed forces on the western borders in North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan borders have been put on red alert against any threat" of bin Laden getting into Pakistan, said the official.

Special US forces are operating in southern Afghanistan hunting al-Qaeda targets.

Bush, Putin talk NMD

AP, Crawford

President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin rattled around Bush's Texas ranch in a pickup truck and feasted on mesquite-smoked beef and pressed toward an understanding on US plans to develop a missile defense system.

A day after Bush and Putin agreed to reduce their nuclear stockpiles, White House aides cautioned against expectations of a breakthrough before Putin leaves Thursday. Talks had snagged Tuesday in the summit's opening at the White House, but were still on track, aides said.

In blue jeans and boots, Bush pulled up in a white pickup truck to greet Putin at a helipad on his ranch. "I want to show him some of my favourite spots on the ranch," the president said.

"I still know how to drive," said Bush, who customarily rides in a limousine with a Secret Service agent in the driver's seat. With no horses on his 1,600 acres (640 hectares) of land, the president calls himself a "windshield rancher."

On his way to the ranch, Putin stopped at Rice University in Houston to call for closer ties between Russia and NATO. In an address, Putin said the 19-member alliance formed to counter the Soviet Union could use Russia's

help to tackle 21st century threats such as terrorism.

"The leaders of NATO countries now understand that if there is an ally which can bring contribution in confronting those threats, this is Russia," Putin said, suggesting that Moscow could even take part in NATO decision-making.

Bush and Putin are under pressure to reach an accord on missile defense. The Pentagon is anxious to conduct tests, even though they would violate the current interpretation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and Bush has told Putin he will seek to scrap the pact early next year if they can't reach agreement.

On the other hand, aides said Bush is considering visiting Russia in the first few months of 2002 a sign, perhaps, that the president may be willing to wait that long to strike a deal.

"This is one stop along the road. We'll make other stops after Crawford but each stop is built on the positive results of the earlier meetings," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

One senior administration official said Bush and Putin seemed to reach an understanding if not a formal agreement that the United States would conduct anti-missile tests under the ABM, perhaps not long after Putin returns to Russia.



US President George W. Bush (2nd-L) and First Lady Laura Bush (R) greet Russian President Vladimir Putin (2nd-R) and his wife Lyudmila Putin on Wednesday at the Bush's Crawford, Texas, ranch. Mrs. Putin presented Mrs. Bush with a yellow rose.

Detail plans for nuclear devices found in Kabul

AFP, London

Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network held detailed plans for nuclear devices and other lethal bombs in a Kabul headquarters, a British daily reported Thursday.

"Naturally the explosive liquid has a very high mechanical energy which is translated into destructive force," said one of the notes unearthed by The Times newspaper.

"But it can be tamed, controlled and can be used as a useful propulsive fuel if certain methods are applied to it. A supersonic moving missile has a shock wave. That shock wave can be used to contain an external combustion behind the missile," the note added.

The Times discovered the partly burnt document in a hastily abandoned safe house in the Karta Parwan quarter of the Afghan capital.

Written in Arabic, German, Urdu and English, the instructions gave detailed designs for missiles,

bombs and nuclear weapons, according to the paper.

These included notes on how the detonation of TNT compresses plutonium into a critical mass, sparking a chain reaction, and ultimately a thermonuclear reaction.

Both US President George W. Bush and Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair have said they believe that chief terror suspect bin Laden has access to nuclear material.

Nuclear experts told the paper that the design suggested that bin Laden may have been working on a fission device, similar to "Fat Man," the bomb dropped on Nagasaki.

However, they emphasised that it was extremely difficult to build a viable warhead.

The document was one of many found in two of four Al-Qaeda houses which had been used by Arabs and Pakistanis and even by bin Laden himself, according to the paper.



Miss World contestants pose for photographers on Wednesday during a photo call at the Cascades Hotel in Sun City, some 200 km northwest of Johannesburg. From left to right, Miss Brazil Joyce Aguiar, Miss Uruguay Maria Abasolo, Miss Australia Eva Milic, Miss Argentina Virginia Di Salco, Miss Aruba Zerelda Lee, Miss Nicaragua Ligia Arguello Roa and Miss USA Carrie Stroup. The Miss World pageant will take place today.

Violence flares up in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

A Palestinian man was killed and 15 wounded in an Israeli army raid in a Gaza Strip refugee camp as Palestinians marked the 13th anniversary of Yasser Arafat's declaration of a still-unrealised state, and Washington played down hopes of a major new Middle East peace initiative.

The unidentified man was shot in the head in clashes following an Israeli incursion into Khan Yunis refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip overnight.

He died Thursday morning, Palestinian hospital sources said, bringing to 971 the number of people killed since the start of the Palestinian uprising, or intifada, in September 2000.

Witnesses said seven homes belonging to Palestinians were seriously damaged by Israeli tanks in the raid before Israeli forces partially withdrew from

Palestinian-controlled land.

Israeli military officials said the raid was provoked by Palestinian militants firing mortar rounds at Israeli positions around a Jewish settlement close to Khan Yunis, causing no casualties, late Wednesday.

Meanwhile, Washington was said to have another go at peace initiatives in the Middle East in the wake of its successful campaign in Afghanistan.

But the United States downplayed hopes it would demand immediate action on a Middle East peace plan, ahead of a keynote speech on foreign policy by Secretary of State Colin Powell on Monday.

The State Department moved to deflate expectations following a Washington Post report which said Powell would use the speech to underscore support for a Palestinian state and signal more intensive involvement to quell the bloody conflict.

UNSC endorses Afghan blueprint

AP, United Nations

The UN Security Council has unanimously approved a resolution endorsing efforts to help fill a political vacuum in Afghanistan and provide security for the vast areas of the country captured by anti-Taliban forces.

The resolution adopted Wednesday makes no explicit reference to a multinational force, but US Ambassador John Negroponte said it provides enough authority for coalition troops already in Afghanistan to help maintain law and order in the capital, Kabul, and areas vacated by the fleeing Taliban forces.

Britain and France pledged to contribute troops, but said another

resolution would be needed later to authorise the sending of an international force.

The resolution endorses a UN initiative to bring Afghanistan's disparate ethnic groups together to form a transitional government and warns all Afghan forces "to refrain from acts of reprisal."

It also urges the 189 UN member states to provide "urgent humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering" of the Afghan people.

Britain's UN Ambassador Jeremy Greenstock said the council wants the top UN envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, who outlined the UN initiative on Tuesday, to quickly convene a meeting of Afghan leaders on a transitional administration.

The United Arab Emirates has agreed to a UN request to host a meeting of Afghan factions to discuss Afghanistan's political future, two US officials said Wednesday.

The gathering could take place as soon as this weekend, one State Department official said.

Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN special envoy for Afghanistan, was sending his deputy for political affairs, Francesco Vendrell, to Afghanistan to gather representatives from the factions. He was then heading to the Emirates, the officials said.

Brahimi told the Security Council he hopes the meeting will take place sometime next week, diplomats said.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan praised the Security Council

for acting "very quickly." Negroponte called the resolution "a complete endorsement to the political game plan... Brahimi laid out."

Russia's UN Ambassador Serge Lavrov said all 15 members of the Security Council believe the Afghans themselves must decide how security should be handled.

The resolution expresses "strong support for the efforts of the Afghan people to establish a new and transitional government leading to the formation of a government... (which) should be broad-based, multiethnic and representative of all the Afghan people and committed to peace with Afghanistan's neighbours."



Afghan man shakes hand with a 17-year-old girl living next door to him in downtown Kabul on Thursday. The Northern Alliance, which swept into Kabul on Tuesday, lost no time overturning some of the harsh edicts issued by the Islamic militia which had ruled here since 1996.