

US allies redeploy troops on humanitarian mission

Push on for broad-based Afghan unity govt

AFP, Kabul

Thousands of troops from US allies were redeploying in support of a massive humanitarian effort in Afghanistan Friday, while US bombers and opposition forces punished the Taliban's few remaining footholds in the country.

At the same time, international envoys stepped up their drive to broker a unity government, as Afghan tribal leaders launched a mission to press the Taliban to surrender.

Top US military leaders announced a shift in their campaign, saying US forces were "tightening the noose" on leaders of the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda network, in a bid to crush the terror organisation run by Osama bin Laden.

A US defence official said late Thursday the US-backed opposition Northern Alliance captured some senior Al-Qaeda leaders, but not bin Laden, in what could be a valuable coup on the intelligence front.

The Taliban, however, remained defiant, and the headline militia's leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, as well as bin Laden -- accused of master-

minding the September 11 terror attacks on the United States -- reportedly vowed to fight to the death.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said the United States may send in more ground troops to secure and repair airfields to be used to go after Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, and possibly expand humanitarian operations.

With the Taliban cornered in their southern Afghan bastion and in one northern city, efforts to step up relief supplies to the Afghan population gained momentum.

Britain said it was sending its first diplomatic representative to Kabul since Soviet forces left the central Asian country in 1989, as around 100 British commandos landed outside the city to secure the airfield for possible humanitarian operations.

The French defence ministry announced a group of 60 troops were to leave France early Friday for Uzbekistan on route to the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif, to establish a base for coalition humanitarian operations.

Britain, France and Canada have offered

several thousand troops to support humanitarian efforts and backing has also come from Muslim nations Jordan, Turkey and Indonesia, which have made troops available.

In Washington, the US State Department announced that the United States and Japan would co-host a high-level meeting next week to discuss financial aid for the reconstruction of war-torn Afghanistan.

Relief organisations say Afghanistan will need huge amounts of emergency and longer term aid.

As US warplanes directed by commandos on the ground bombed targets in Afghanistan for a sixth consecutive week, US troops also targeted Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders, some of whom were apparently captured by the opposition.

A Pentagon official, who asked not to be identified, said late Thursday: "We have reason to believe that the Northern Alliance has come into possession of some senior leaders."

"They are senior enough to provide some meaningful information," the official said, noting that US officials had not yet had access to the captives.



Senior Afghan group leaders attend a meeting between the Hizb-e-Islam Khalis group and the Eastern Zone Shoora movement, held on Friday in the city of Jalalabad which comes under the control of Mujahedins. The fall of Kabul into the hand of the Afghanistan's Northern Alliance speeded up negotiations among Afghan factions about the political future of the country.

Myanmar arrests 200 anti-Indian rebels

AFP, Guwahati

India Friday said insurgency in the country's troubled northeastern region had received a major blow after 200 anti-Indian militants were arrested in Myanmar.

A Siddiqui, police chief of India's rebel-infested northeastern state of Manipur, told AFP over the telephone from the state capital Imphal, that the sweeping arrests would help Indian troops battle insurgency.

Many of the guerrilla groups who are fighting for an independent homeland in Manipur use bases inside Myanmar to launch their attacks.

"After the arrests, the rebel groups are in a state of disarray... They will take time to regroup and settle down making them vulnerable to our forces," said Siddiqui.

Macedonia gets new constitution

AFP, Skopje

The Macedonian parliament proclaimed a new constitution early Friday, increasing the rights of the country's ethnic-Albanian minority.

The vote went through with a large majority, with 94 deputies voting in favour and only 14 against the measures which form the backbone of a western-backed peace plan signed in August.

The changes are designed to placate the ethnic Albanians, some of whom staged a February-to-August uprising that threatened to tilt Macedonia into civil war.

Western-led peace negotiations resolved the conflict, with the ethnic Albanian rebel movement, the National Liberation Army (NLA), agreeing to lay down its arms, though the situation remains tense.

Under 15 changes voted in late Thursday to replace the old 1991 constitution, Albanian becomes Macedonia's second official language. Ethnic Albanians also get a voice in parliament and other public bodies and minority political, religious and cultural rights are guaranteed.

India mulls reopening embassy in Kabul

AFP, New Delhi

India is considering reopening its embassy in the Afghan capital, just days after the city was captured by the Northern Alliance, the Times of India reported Friday.

The newspaper quoted unidentified government officials as saying New Delhi was looking into sending a plane load of relief supplies to Afghanistan as well as opening the Kabul embassy.

"There is a proposal to see how quickly this can be done and also to organise a relief flight there," a senior official told the newspaper. "But it is not a simple matter," he added.

'India needs to boost legal framework to fight terror'

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Friday the country needed to strengthen its legal framework in order to fight terrorism.

"Our experience against terrorism has clearly demonstrated that we have to have a combat programme, whose crucial ingredient has to be sustainability," Vajpayee said while addressing the chief ministers of all Indian states.

"Sustainability is a product of strong political will, the capabilities of the security forces and, last but not the least, an enabling legislative framework," Vajpayee added.



Freed American aid worker Heather Mercer (R) and Dayna Curry smile while facing the press in Islamabad on Friday. Mercer said they are happy and feel good after getting freed from Taliban custody. Eight Western aid workers held for three months by the Taliban on charges of preaching Christianity were freed on Thursday and lifted by US military helicopters from Afghanistan to Pakistan.

Call to deploy army ahead of Lankan polls

AFP, Colombo

Police in Sri Lanka have sought the help of army reinforcements to quell rising campaign-related violence ahead of next month's parliamentary elections, a top police official said Friday.

The police have asked for the assistance of some 5,000 soldiers to guard vulnerable state institutions and man road blocks, duties which were earlier handled by constables, police Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Gamini Navaratne said.

"We have asked the army commander for the reinforcements so that we can deploy more constables for election-related duties," Navaratne told reporters.

German govt set to win vote of confidence

AFP, Berlin

Schroeder was set to win a confidence vote on Germany's participation in the US-led anti-terrorist war in Afghanistan on Friday after only four Greens out of eight pacifist rebels said they would vote against him, a Green deputy said.

"Our group has decided to split in two," Wilfried Hermann, one of the group, said after a meeting of the parliamentary Greens.

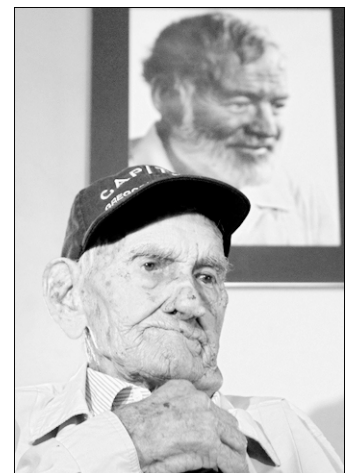
Violence claims 13 in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

An Indian army officer and 12 Muslim separatist militants have died in fresh violence in Indian Kashmir, officials said Friday.

Five militants were killed by security forces in the village of Sunarkalpora, near Magam township, 35 km west of Srinagar, the state's summer capital.

Border Security Force (BSF) and Indian army counter-insurgency troops sealed off the village in the early hours of Friday following a tip-off, a BSF spokesman told AFP.



Gregorio Fuentes is seated beneath a portrait of the late US author Ernest Hemingway Fuentes' 104th birthday on Thursday in Havana, Cuba. Fuentes, who piloted a boat which Hemingway used during the 1940's and in 50's, is said to be the inspiration for Hemingway's famed novel "The Old Man and the Sea".

Harrison Ford to receive Cecil B. DeMille Award

AFP, Los Angeles

Actor Harrison Ford is to receive this year's Cecil B. DeMille career-achievement award from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA), the group announced Thursday.

Ford, 59, will receive the prize for his "outstanding contribution to the entertainment field" at the 59th Golden Globe Awards ceremony in Beverly Hills on January 20, HFPA President Dagmar Dunlevy said at a news conference.

Al Pacino, Barbra Streisand, Jack Nicholson, Shirley MacLaine, Dustin Hoffman, Sean Connery and Sophia Loren are among past recipients of the award created in memory of the legendary director of "The Ten Commandments" and "Cleopatra."

Ford's career was honoured last year by the American Film Institute, which each year recognises an artist "whose talent has in a fundamental way advanced the film art" and "whose work has stood the test of time."

Concern mounts over human cost of war in Afghanistan

AFP, Quetta

Doctors and relief workers are voicing growing concerns that the psychological impact of the war in Afghanistan is not being addressed as the human cost mounts.

There are no accurate figures on how many civilians have been killed, wounded or maimed in Afghanistan since the US unleashed its military might on October 7, but it undoubtedly runs into the hundreds, perhaps thousands.

Millions more Afghans have been displaced, watched family members die or their homes destroyed.

Outside of Afghanistan, the most visible sign of the human impact can be seen in this southwestern Pakistani city, close to the border where the war-wounded and others who have run for their lives are found.

Doctors at the city's main hospital, the Sandeman Provincial, treat new cases every day and are now running out of supplies, particularly the metal plates used to repair limbs crushed by falling walls.

They estimate they have seen at least 60 seriously injured people in

the weeks since the US started bombing. Quetta's other hospitals have treated similar numbers, as has the basic medical facility at Chaman, on the border with Afghanistan.

Psychiatrists have also had to cope with a massive rise in patient numbers.

"A large number have post traumatic stress disorder," Dr. Ghulam Rasool, consultant psychiatrist at the Bolam Medical College, told AFP.

Rasool is one of just five psychiatrists in Quetta and is seeing at least 100 patients a day, more than 60 percent of whom are traumatised Afghans. And that, he says, is just the tip of the iceberg.

"They are depressed and anxious, they are irritable, have lost their appetite. There is a real feeling of loss -- loss of body, loss of money, loss of friends and family," he said.

"The psychological trauma is deep. Their basic needs have been ignored. They feel insecure, have no stability and are suffering the effects of war, deficiency of food."

Rasool, who is working 15 hours a day, said one of the main problems

was that refugees could not afford medicines.

"If they are not treated, it will become chronic stress disorder and even suicide," he said.

Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF) team leader Aitor Zabalgoeazkoa said it was too early to judge the long-term impact of the war on Afghan people.

"Of course the people who are running are very scared. They have seen the kind of horror that many will never see," he said.

"But in my experience only something like five percent of people suffering the effects of violence like this need long-term psychological assistance."

He also pointed to the fact that many Afghans were used to hardship with the country wracked by war and drought for years.

"Many are realistic enough to face the situation and get on with it. They have a coping mechanism with family and friends. They more or less assimilate it and it is very difficult to judge how traumatised and affected they are."

Capture of Al-Qaida leaders raises hope for netting Laden

AFP, Kabul

The reported capture of senior leaders of Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaida network boosted hopes Friday of bringing to justice the suspected mastermind of September's terror attacks on the United States.

With bin Laden's Taliban protectors cornered in their southern stronghold of Kandahar, Washington believes the Saudi-born dissident is running out of friends, time and places to hide.

"We are tightening the noose,"

said Army General Tommy Franks, the commander of the US military campaign in Afghanistan.

A Pentagon official said in Washington on Thursday there was reason to believe anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces had captured some senior Al-Qaida leaders who might provide clues to bin Laden's whereabouts.

"They are senior enough to provide some meaningful information," the official said.

Further intelligence could be gleaned once Kandahar eventually falls. The southern city is home to

the Taliban's headquarters and the militia's supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar.

With the Taliban in disarray and Kabul in the hands of the Northern Alliance, the focus of the US military campaign is now centered firmly on its prime objective -- the capture of bin Laden dead or alive and the destruction of the Al-Qaida network.

Bin Laden himself has said he believes the Americans will kill him sooner or later and that he would rather die than be handed over into US custody.

Laden may strike back: Ridge

AFP, Washington

Now that terror suspect Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaida network are on the run in Afghanistan they may decide to strike out again at the United States, warned director of Homeland Security Tom Ridge.

"I think it makes a great deal of common sense to conclude that if you are putting pressure on your enemy in one area or one venue, they may choose to act out in a separate area, a different venue," Ridge said during a visit to the Energy Department Thursday.

"And so that is one consideration that obviously is in play," Ridge added, following up on a statement by Vice President Richard Cheney Wednesday that the terrorist threat level would not end with the capture or demise of

bin Laden.

The United States has maintained a high state of alert since the September 11 terror attacks that killed around 5,000 people in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, and especially after it launched an allied assault October 7 on the Al-Qaida network and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Ridge said the US "state of readiness and wariness is as high as it has ever been, and will remain that high until we have apprehended Bin Laden and dismantled Al-Qaida."

But, he quickly added, "that is not to say that once bin Laden and Al-Qaida have been dismantled and apprehended that we would not continue to work very aggressively toward enhancing our homeland security."

Israel calls for truce as Ramadan begins

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinians began observing the fasting period of Ramadan on Friday as Israeli President Moshe Katsav appealed for a ceasefire during the Muslim holy month amid a raft of conciliatory gestures.

Palestinians on Thursday commemorated their symbolic 1988 declaration of independence, but the low turnout at rallies underlined the exhaustion and division that a year of intifada -- uprising -- bloodshed has wrought.

Meanwhile Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said in New York that most Israelis favoured an independent Palestinian state and added that he saw no other way of achieving peace.

But he told reporters that this was not official Israeli government policy and, in a speech to the UN General Assembly, he sidestepped a call from Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to resume talks on the permanent status of the Palestinian territories. The more moderate Israeli tone was bolstered by President Katsav's call for a ceasefire.

"In the name of the Israeli peo-

ple, I take this opportunity to call on our Palestinian neighbours, the people and their leadership, to put out the fire so that we can engage in a serious and fundamental dialogue that will lead us to real peace and security," he said.

Israel also announced a series of measures to ease the blockade on the Palestinian territories for the holy month of Ramadan, when devout Muslims observe a dawn-to-dusk fast.

"For the beginning of Ramadan, like in previous years when there wasn't an intifada, we have begun easing restraints," said Raanan Gissin, spokesman for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

He also said he hoped the arrest of Jenin's Islamic Jihad leader, Mahmud Tawalbeh, 20, on Wednesday marked the start of a new clampdown on extremists holding the peace process hostage.

Jihad officials said earlier they had been promised by the Palestinian Authority that Tawalbeh would be released, but sources close to his family said that he was still in jail in the West Bank city of Nablus late Thursday.

First cloned human embryos soon

AFP, Lexington

The first cloned human embryos could be produced "pretty soon", a scientist involved in a controversial international project to clone humans, Panayotis Zavos, said Thursday.

"We will be attempting pretty soon the first nuclear transfers," Zavos told AFP in an interview. "As we speak, we are running now."

He said the production of the cloned embryos would take place sometime before the end of the year, or at the start of 2002 at the latest, but would not give an exact date.

Ten couples who are unable to have children on their own are participating in his research, conducted in two secret laboratories in one or two countries which Zavos refused to name.

"We've done it in animals, and we've done nuclear transfers of human cells into an animal ovocyte, but we haven't done a nuclear transfer of a human cell into a human ovocyte," or early-stage egg, Zavos said.

Zavos, a Greek Cypriot naturalized US citizen, belongs to an international consortium of about 12 specialists on human reproduction, including Italian physician Severino Antinori, which in January announced plans to clone a human being.

Zavos and Antinori said they would eventually impregnate up to 200 women with cloned embryos.

Their initial target is to create embryos by transferring the nucleus of a cell from one of the two parents into an ovocyte extracted from a woman.



Miss World contestants pose for photographers on Thursday in Sun City, some 200 km north-west of Johannesburg, as they prepare for the finale of Miss World contest on Friday.