



Foreign journalists accompanied by Afghans visit the bombed compound residence of Osama bin Laden on Sunday in the suburbs of the Afghan eastern city of Jalalabad. The compound was bombed by US airplanes early this month. Foreign journalists kept visiting the site in the last few days.

Talks on Afghan govt show sign of progress

AFP, Kabul

Negotiators hoped Tuesday to flesh out the first outlines of a plan for a post-Taliban government here, as security fears mounted in the battered country and hampered relief operations.

But as talks between international envoys and officials of Afghanistan's Northern Alliance forces gathered momentum, a bloody battle loomed over one of the last strongholds held by the Taliban Islamic militia.

An intensive round of political talks was held Monday involving Burhanuddin Rabbani, president of the North Alliance that controls Kabul, and envoys from the United Nations, the United States and Britain.

Younis Qanooni, the alliance's information minister, said afterward an agreement had been reached "in principle" on a UN blueprint for constituting a new government, but technical details needed to be ironed out.

"On the details we have some observations and we are going to inform (UN envoy Francesco) Vendrell about that tomorrow (Tuesday) morning," Qanooni told AFP late Monday.

US special envoy James Dobbins said he was confident a UN-backed meeting of eminent Afghans could take place as early as this week.

The holding of inter-Afghan conference -- most probably in a neutral European venue -- is the first step of a five-point UN plan for the creation of a new representative government in Afghanistan.

"They are ready to move forward to the creation of a new broader government which will represent all regions, all ethnicities," Dobbins told reporters after his return to neighbouring Pakistan.

After chasing the Taliban from Kabul a week ago, the Northern Alliance had been hesitant about signing up to the UN blueprint, prompting concerns that it was unwilling to relinquish its hold on the country's seat of power.

But Dobbins was upbeat about the alliance's attitude after his discussions Monday.

"They are willing to work within the framework established by the UN for developing such a government. They have agreed both to the locations that the UN are proposing and the timing that the UN are proposing."

The UN and US envoys had met earlier with exiled Afghan ethnic leaders, and conferred in Rome with former king Mohammed Zahir Shah, widely seen as a potential unifying force in deeply divided Afghanistan.

Public expectations of any new administration are high after years of headline Taliban rule. Around 200 Afghan women threw off their burqa veils Tuesday in a symbolic rally to demand respect for women's rights.

Continuing insecurity on the ground in Afghanistan was highlighted by news that four journalists were feared to have been killed in a roadside ambush on the road toward Kabul from the eastern town of Jalalabad.

Spain, UK restart diplomatic tussle over Gibraltar

AFP, Barcelona

Britain and Spain hold a new round of talks here Tuesday on their long-standing dispute over Gibraltar, the British colony off the southern Spanish coast, amid reports that London could accept some form of joint sovereignty.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and his Spanish counterpart Josep Pique were due to meet in the Catalan capital Barcelona over the Rock, where some 30,000 Gibraltarians -- increasingly worried about their fate -- live.

Before the two met to discuss the issue, which has soured bilateral relations for nearly 300 years, a British official signalled that London may be prepared to change long-held policy.

"If Spain wants to have an office and fly a flag on Gibraltar, we will look at that," the Financial Times on Tuesday quoted the unnamed official as saying.

Japanese FM plans to visit Pakistan

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka said Tuesday she wanted to visit Pakistan later this week and meet President Pervez Musharraf to assess the changing situation in Afghanistan.

"We have received a response from the Japanese embassy in Islamabad that President Musharraf will be able to meet me on the 26th," Tanaka said at a regular news conference.

MPs protest reappointment of Fernandes

AFP, New Delhi

Angry Indian opposition MPs Tuesday protested against the reappointment of a scandal-tainted defence minister and demanded he be dismissed immediately.

George Fernandes resigned as defence minister in March over allegations of corruption in defence deals, but was reinstated in the cabinet by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee last month.

He had quit after a news Website ran an expose on his defence ministry which showed top-level officials allegedly taking bribes from journalists who posed as arms dealers.

The government is yet to finish an investigation into the scandal, which shocked India.

Lanka seeks UN peacekeeping jobs for soldiers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is trying to secure UN peacekeeping jobs for its troops once the Tamil Tiger separatist conflict is over and they are demobilised, President Chandrika Kumaratunga said Tuesday.

In a letter as security forces were preparing to cast postal ballots in the December 5 parliamentary polls, Kumaratunga assured troops they would not lose their jobs even though the island was working towards resolving the long-running conflict.

Taliban lose track of Bin Laden

AFP, Doha

The Taliban said Tuesday that suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden was in Kabul when it fell to the Northern Alliance, but that it had since lost track of him.

Bin Laden "was in Kabul during its fall (on November 13). He left there and since then we no longer know if he is in Afghanistan or has left the country," Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban's ambassador to Islamabad, told Qatar's Al-Jazeera satellite television channel.

US President George W. Bush said Monday the "noose is beginning to narrow" around bin Laden, chief suspect in the September 11 terrorist strikes in the United States, but refused to set a deadline for his capture.

Zaeef confirmed that Mohammad Atef, one of bin Laden's deputies and military commander of his Al-Qaeda network, was killed "close to a Kandahar market."

"It is a war. It is normal for there to be (human) losses. Arab brothers and Afghans have died, maybe thousands of them," he said, without giving an exact number of casualties.

Zaeef blasted as a "political plot" the moves by the United Nations to organise an inter-Afghan conference, probably in Europe, on the future of the war-torn country.

"Those who want to take part in it are not sincere. It is a useless political plot and we do not want to be involved in such a plot," he said.

Bodies of 4 slain journalists recovered in Afghanistan

AFP, Peshawar

The bodies of four ambush victims, believed to be journalists, were recovered Tuesday from a roadside in eastern Afghanistan, a local police chief told AFP.

Nangarhar provincial police chief Hazrat Ali said bodies, which had not yet been identified, would be brought to the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad.

One victim of the ambush, an Italian journalist, has already been identified by officials in Rome. A Spanish journalist and two employees of the British news agency Reuters are also reported as missing.

UK denies rift with US

AFP, London

London insisted Tuesday that there was no rift with Washington that was delaying the deployment of thousands of British troops in Afghanistan.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said he had seen news reports overnight of the rift over the precise role of the troops "with some bemusement."

According to The Times and The Independent, quoting defence and diplomatic sources, Washington is more concerned with hunting down alleged terror suspect Osama bin Laden and getting rid of the Taliban regime than setting up a force to aid humanitarian activity.

Straw said there were "discussions" about the deployment of British troops, as they were under overall US central command, "which has been running all of the military operations."

Terror link possible in Russian plane crash

AFP, Moscow

An act of terrorism may have caused a Russian passenger plane crash during a flight from Siberia to Moscow, killing all 25 people on board, according to a local air transport chief.

At the moment that the plane, travelling at 7,800 metres (25,000 feet), disappeared from radar screens, a bright glow was seen and a strong explosion was heard, said Victor Ossipov, air chief for the Krasnoyarsk area in Russia's north-eastern Siberian region, citing local witness accounts.

Ossipov voiced astonishment that the plane's pilots had not indicated any problems during the flight.

the Ria Novosti news agency reported.

A terrorist act "is only one of the possibilities, but it is impossible to rule it out," Ossipov was quoted as saying.

All 25 people on board the plane died when the turboprop aircraft crashed four-and-a-half hours into its flight to Moscow from the Siberian town of Khatanga.

The Ilushin IL-18 came down around 20 kilometres (15 miles) from the village of Kalyazin, in the northern Tver region, after disappearing from radar screens at 9:24 pm (1824 GMT) Monday, the emergency ministry said.

Manila launches manhunt for Muslim revolt leader

AFP, Cotabato

Philippine troops on Tuesday mounted a manhunt for Muslim leader Nur Misuari, the presumed instigator of an armed revolt that left 59 people dead in his southern Jolo island stronghold, senior officials said.

"Nur Misuari is now the subject of a manhunt by military authorities because of what his men did," armed forces chief of staff General Diomedio Villanueva told reporters in the southern city of Cotabato.

President Gloria Arroyo's adviser on minority issues, Eduardo Ermita, added in Manila: "The military and the police already have instructions to locate him and prevent him from leaving the country."

The military on Monday repulsed an attack by about 600 armed followers of Misuari in Jolo that left 59 people dead and 85 others wounded.

Officials said Misuari was trying to prevent Monday's elections in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao, where he has served as governor since his separatist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) signed a peace treaty with Manila in 1996.



Arroyo, who is supporting a candidate from a rival faction, ordered Misuari suspended from his post immediately pending an investigation into his role in the armed revolt.

Villanueva said he believes Misuari has remained in Jolo, possibly in the company of the notorious Abu Sayyaf Muslim guerrilla group.

He said Misuari was last seen in the company of Abu Sayyaf leaders Galib Andang and Mujib Susukan near the town of Indanan last week.

"(Misuari) has a lot of explaining to do," Villanueva warned.

Earlier Tuesday, Arroyo gave Misuari two days to back down and explain his role in the armed revolt or face military action.

Justice Undersecretary Jose Calida said Misuari, who launched a separatist rebellion in 1972, could be charged with rebellion and jailed for 20 years if it was proved he led or promoted the uprising.

Indian troops kill 17 militants in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops shot dead 17 Muslim separatist militants in three encounters overnight, while seven civilians were injured in two landmine explosions, police said Tuesday.

Six militants were shot by the Indian army and counter-insurgency police during an incident late Monday in the village of Hari near Surankote town, 500 kilometres (310 miles) south of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

Acting on a tip-off, troops surrounded a suspected militant hide-out and asked the guerrillas inside to surrender, the spokesman said.

"The militants opened fire and tried to escape," he said adding this prompted the troops to return fire.

Six militants of Kashmir's dominant militant group, Hizbul Mujahideen, were killed, the spokesman said.

Police identified one of the dead as Saifullah and said he had been working as Hizbul's "district commander" in the southern Kashmiri district Poonch.

Elsewhere in Kashmir, three more militants were shot dead in the

nearby Khanetar village, the police spokesman said, adding two militants who were Pakistani nationals were killed by security forces at Amia in Jammu, overnight.

In another incident, five militants and a soldier were killed after a fierce four-hour long gunbattle in the Satganga forests in Kupwara district, 100 kilometres (62 miles) north of Srinagar late Monday, the police spokesman said.

The encounter erupted during a cordon and search operation by the Indian army, he said.

Another militant belonging to the pro-Pakistan Harkat-ul-Mujahideen was shot by Indian troops during another cordon and search operation in Rajwar village in Kupwara district.

One soldier was killed and another injured during the fighting.

Meanwhile, four civilians were injured in a landmine explosion at Zandsaran Shiri near Baramulla town, 55 km north of Srinagar.

Police said three other civilians were injured in a similar explosion in the Pargwal area of Kashmir's winter capital, Jammu, 300 kilometres (185 miles) south of here.

Bush hosts Iftar party

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush welcomed ambassadors from some 50 Islamic countries to a dinner at the White House Monday, three days after the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, and underlined that the US-led war on terrorism in Afghanistan was continuing.

"I appreciate your support of our objectives in the campaign against terrorism," Bush said, speaking at the Iftar -- or fast-breaking -- dinner to which Muslim countries were invited, three days before the traditional US Thanksgiving holiday starts Thursday.

"Tonight that campaign continues in Afghanistan, so that the people of Afghanistan will soon know peace," said Bush. "The terrorists have no home in any faith. Evil has no holy days."

Represented at the dinner were a variety of African, Middle Eastern and central and east Asian countries, as well as the Palestinian Authority. However, Iraq, Libya, and Iran, with which the United States has suspended ties, were not present.

"America respects people of all faiths, and America seeks peace with people of all faiths," added Bush, who was seated next to Saudi ambassador Prince Bandar, and US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

UNGA backs ban on human cloning

AP, United Nations

A key General Assembly committee backed a resolution calling for a treaty to ban the cloning of human beings, saying it was "contrary to human dignity."

Under the draft resolution, a group would meet twice next year to define what should be negotiated in an international convention to ban reproductive cloning.

The General Assembly's legal committee endorsed an initiative by France and Germany to get a legal document to ban cloning of human beings, which they say is unacceptable and incompatible with human dignity.

Approval by the 189 nations in the General Assembly is virtually certain.

The draft resolution says "the rapid development of life sciences opens up tremendous prospects for the improvement of human health."

But it would put the General Assembly on record as saying it is "determined to prevent an attack on the dignity of the individual."

"It's an excellent first step," said France's UN Ambassador Jean-David Levitte.

Delhi faces opposition to anti-terrorism law

AFP, New Delhi

The legislation has already been opposed by India's main opposition Congress party and the Communist parties.

Both groups were upset that the Vajpayee government brought in the law without parliamentary approval and without sufficient consultation.

Vajpayee's ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition has a majority in the lower house of parliament, but at a meeting of the NDA on Monday several government allies said they supported the need to have anti-terrorism legislation but expressed apprehension that the POTO could be misused.

The measure needs to be passed by both houses of parliament or it will lapse on December 21.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's attempt to give security agencies greater powers to combat suspected terror groups appeared to be floundering Tuesday amid widespread criticism of the move.

Last month, the Indian cabinet approved the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO) which seeks to curb funding to suspected terrorist groups, confiscate their property and intercept communication between terrorists.

US commits itself to ME peace

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli tanks and bulldozers rolled into an autonomous Palestinian area of the Gaza Strip overnight Monday, providing an unwanted backdrop to Washington's new Middle East peace initiative.

The Israeli forces entered an autonomous Palestinian sector of the Gaza Strip, encroaching 100 metres (yards) inside the Rafah refugee camp, near the Egyptian border, a Palestinian security source and witnesses said early Tuesday.

The news came just hours after both Israel and the Palestinians hailed a "historic" speech by US Secretary of State Colin Powell Monday in which he aimed tough words at both sides' shortcomings but pledged Washington's commitment to tackle the Middle East crisis.

As both sides sought to put their own spin on the speech in Louisville, Kentucky, the only voice of dissent came from the Jewish settlers on Palestinian land, who were told by Powell to freeze their activities, which he said were aggravating the crisis.

Powell vowed stepped-up US engagement in the Middle East, starting with the dispatch of two envoys to the region, but demanded concessions from both Israel and the Palestinians.

In a long-awaited statement of Washington's Middle East policy, Powell told Israel to end its occupation of Arab lands and instructed the Palestinians to crush terrorism in a speech that won applause in the region and Europe.

Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs William Burns and retired General Anthony Zinni, whom Powell designated his "senior advisor" on the Middle East, should be in the region by the weekend, he said.

As the United States renewed its focus on Middle Eastern peace, President George W. Bush repeated a key US demand that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat crack down on anti-Israeli violence.

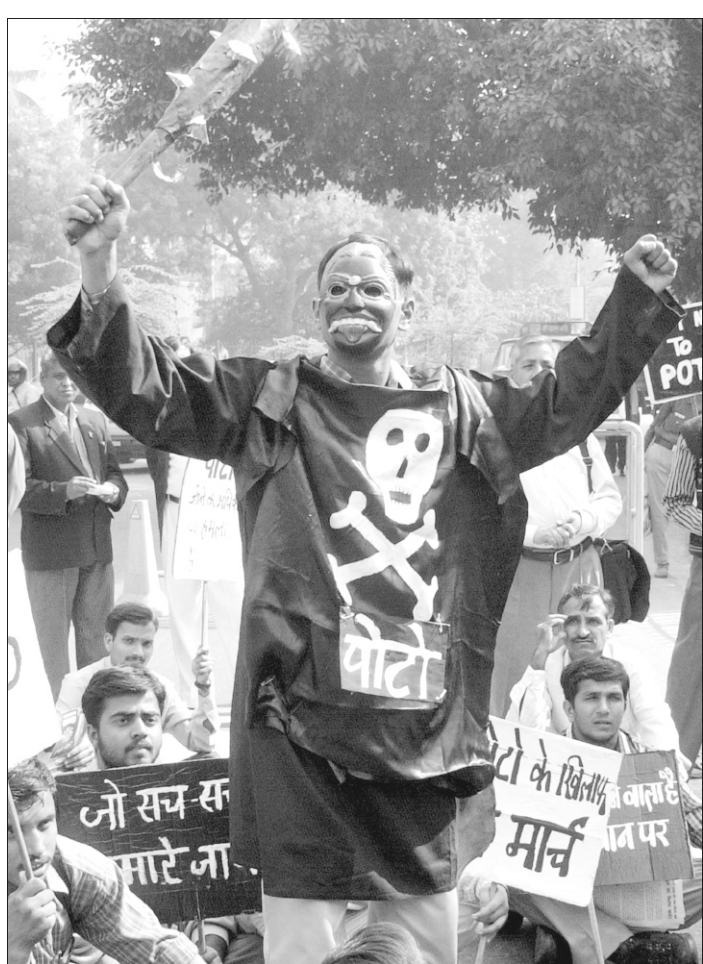
"It also is important for us to remind Mr. Arafat that in order for their peace discussions to begin, that the level of violence must substantially be reduced," Bush said after meeting with his cabinet.

"The Palestinian leadership welcomes Mr. Powell's request for Israel to end its occupation and to implement the UN resolutions, the land for peace formula, and the creation of a Palestinian state side by side with Israel," top Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP.

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Activists from the People's Rally Against the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO) shout slogans against Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government near parliament in New Delhi on Tuesday. The Indian government will table POTO during the winter session of parliament amidst strong protests by opposition parties, claiming it is too restrictive in its present form.