

## India sends diplomatic mission to Afghanistan

AFP, New Delhi

India has sent a diplomatic mission to Afghanistan for the first time since New Delhi officially closed its embassy in Kabul in 1996, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said Wednesday.

"The mission, which included a special envoy for Afghanistan, arrived at Bagram air field near Kabul at 0955 hours (0425 GMT) on Wednesday," Singh told parliament.

The mission also includes a team of doctors and nurses, he said.

India, like Russia and Iran, supported the Northern Alliance in its fight against the Taliban, which came to power with the help of Pakistan.

## BSF kills 14 militants in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops have shot dead 14 Muslim militants in Indian-administered Kashmir, a defence spokesman said Wednesday.

The paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF) shot 12 militants in the Ramgarh area, 50 kilometres (31 miles) south of Kashmir's winter capital Jammu, as they were trying to cross the border from Pakistan to India, the spokesman said.

Elsewhere counter-insurgency police shot dead two militants belonging to the Pakistan-based Al Badar group on the outskirts of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar late Tuesday, the spokesman added.

## Manila mounts air raid against Muslim rebels

AFP, Jolo

Air Force planes and helicopters bombed rebel-held areas of the southern Philippines island of Jolo on Wednesday as the toll from a Muslim armed uprising rose to 64 dead and 91 wounded, officials and witnesses said.

Two OV-10 planes swooped in during the early afternoon and dropped bombs on rebel positions on the wooded hills near the town of Patikul, and two MG-520 helicopters followed through with rocket fire, an AFP photographer saw.

Southern military commander Lieutenant-General Roy Cimatu told reporters in this provincial capital, also called Jolo, that more military aircraft, including F-5 fighter jets, would attack the forces of renegade Muslim leader Nur Misuari later Wednesday.

## \$ 25 m bounty on bin Laden

AFP, Washington

Secretary of State Colin Powell said Tuesday he was boosting a US reward for information leading to the arrest of suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden to 25 million dollars.

"I have the authority, which I will use, to authorise an award of up to 25 million dollars for the capture of Osama bin Laden," Powell said after meeting here with German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer.

"The legal paperwork is being accomplished but that will be our position."

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said later that the department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, which oversees the reward program, had received more 22,000 tips in response to appeals for information about bin Laden since the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

"The majority of these have come through e-mail and telephone," he said, declining to elaborate on the nature of the information except to say that it had all been passed on the relevant authorities.

## Croat war crimes suspect flies to The Hague

AFP, Zagreb

Pasko Ljubicic, a Bosnian Croat indicted by the UN war crimes court for allegedly planning a massacre of over 100 Bosnian Muslims, arrived Wednesday at Zagreb airport where he was to leave on a regular flight for the Netherlands, his lawyer told journalists.

Ljubicic "arrived around 7 a.m. (0600 GMT) at the airport where he is to say goodbye to his relatives," Tomislav Jonjic said.

He added that Ljubicic would appear in court next week.

Ljubicic, 36, has been indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for his role as a commander of the first company of a battalion of Bosnian Croat military police involved in attacks on the central Bosnian Muslim villages of Vitez and Busovaca between June 1992 and July 1993.

# US may deploy more ground troops in Afghanistan

AFP, Tashkent

The top general in charge of US operations in Afghanistan said Wednesday the United States could soon deploy ground forces in addition to the special troops already stationed in Afghanistan.

"All forms of military forces stay on the table and possibly one or other type of forces will be deployed in Afghanistan," said General Tommy Franks, head of the US Central Command.

"Concerning what I call conventional forces... we have not taken that off the table," said Franks, who during his three-day stay in Uzbekistan visited a former Soviet base where some 2,000 US soldiers are stationed.

Franks said that "we may or we may not" introduce ground forces to flush out suspected terrorists from the remaining Taliban strongholds.

"We may introduce small numbers of ground forces," he said.

On Tuesday, the Pentagon said around 2,300 US Marines were awaiting orders to back up other US forces operating in Afghanistan.

Franks said he had also held talks with Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov and visited opposition Northern Alliance positions in Bagram, near Kabul, becoming the most senior US commander to visit Afghanistan.

The US general divulged few details of his talks with Rakhmonov, saying only that the two discussed the US use of military bases and landing strips in the former Soviet republic that neighbours Afghanistan to the northeast -- close to the last Taliban stronghold of Kunduz.

The two sides have reached a tentative agreement of US use of Tajik airstrips, although officials in Washington note that most facilities in

Tajikistan are disrepair and would have to be rebuilt first.

Franks said he was satisfied with his Bagram visit, saying that he came to make sure that US special forces were getting along with the Northern Alliance commanders on the battlefield.

"I am not at all surprised with how quickly the Taliban regime is falling," said Franks, while stressing that the United States had no plans to let up its campaign after the opposition's "good progress" over the past 10 days.

However Franks refused to predict how long the Taliban standoff might continue in the northern city of Kunduz, where as many as 30,000 militia have been holding out for a week alongside a hard-core component of Arab, Chechen and Pakistani fighters loyal to Al-Qaida.

Opposition commanders from the Northern Alliance, which captured Kabul without a fight last week but does not have the firepower to take Kunduz, have been trying to negotiate the Taliban's surrender.

"I will say that the Taliban and terrorist forces which are in Kunduz continue to resist," said Franks.

Meanwhile, Britain may decide not to deploy more troops in Afghanistan and could withdraw 100 elite marine commandos based near Kabul, according to a newspaper report here Wednesday, quoting an unnamed defence source.

"We may not add (troops) to them (the marines), we may even pull them out," The Guardian quoted the source as saying.

London and Washington insisted on Tuesday there was no rift between them over the deployment of British troops, following newspaper reports to the contrary.

## Laden no longer under Taliban protection

AFP, Spin Boldak

Afghanistan's Taliban militia has lost all contact with terror suspect Osama bin Laden and has no idea where he is, a Taliban spokesman said here Wednesday.

"We have no idea of where he is because you see our areas are limited to three or four provinces, so we no longer know where he is," spokesman Syed Tayyad Agha told a press conference in this southern border town.

"There is no relation now. There is no communication."

Saudi-born militant bin Laden, accused of masterminding the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, has lived in Afghanistan under the Taliban Islamic militia's protection since 1996.

But the Taliban regime has crumbled since the start of retaliatory US air strikes on October 7, and it now controls only a few southern provinces and the besieged northern city of Kunduz.

It now claims to rule only its southern stronghold of Kandahar, plus the adjoining provinces of Helmand, Zabul and Uruzgan, which is also claimed by the rival Northern Alliance.

Agha said the militia had no idea about the location of members of bin Laden's al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan and could not say whether they were in Taliban-controlled provinces.

"We are not sure about their location and numbers. I have no information and I have not seen if there are any al-Qaeda members in Kandahar and provinces (under Taliban control)," he said.

Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Salam Zaeef said Sunday that "Osama is our guest. We will take care of him until the last moment. We don't know where he is."

The Taliban envoy has had a series of confusing remarks attributed to him in recent days concerning the whereabouts of bin Laden.

## US sees imminent UN role in war-torn Afghanistan

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A top US military officer said Wednesday he hoped the United Nations would intervene soon in Afghanistan to help rehabilitate the war ravaged country.

"I would like it to be imminent," Admiral Dennis Blair, commander in chief of the US Pacific Command told reporters at the end of a two-day visit to Malaysia.

Blair said once the US achieved its objective of capturing or killing Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect behind the September 11 terror attacks, the focus would shift to building a new government and a safe society.

"From our point of view, the campaign in Afghanistan is not finished until we find him," he said.

Blair said the Taliban forces were still operating in their southern stronghold Kandahar and in Kunduz in the north. "They need to surrender or be defeated."

The US continues to pound

Kunduz, where Taliban militia forces are holding out against the Northern Alliance, and also Kandahar, the Taliban home base in the south.

On Tuesday, Blair asked Malaysia's Defence Minister Najib Razak if Malaysia would participate in a UN peacekeeping force in Afghanistan.

Najib responded that Malaysia would consider doing so under certain conditions.

But he said the situation in Afghanistan was "fluid", which could put the lives of UN troops at risk.

"We will not send peacekeepers if their safety is at risk. That is one of the paramount principles UN has adhered to."

"If the situation is not right for peacekeepers to be deployed they will not be deployed," he said.

Malaysian troops have served in a variety of peacekeeping missions in the past decade, including in Bosnia and Somalia.



PHOTO: AFP  
Afghan refugee children play under a makeshift tent on a dusty road at an unregistered refugee camp in the outskirts of Islamabad on Wednesday. For many Afghan refugees, living in squalid over-crowded camps in Pakistan remains preferable to returning home to an unclear political situation, a collapse of law and order and the onset of winter.

## Long road ahead for Afghan govt

AFP, Islamabad

It took four days of talks in Kabul just to get Afghanistan's Northern Alliance to agree to the time and place of a meeting on a new government of national reconciliation.

And that was the easy part. The real work lies down the road.

To the uninitiated, Tuesday's announcement by UN special envoy Francesc Vendrell that the alliance that controls Kabul had agreed to meet other Afghan groups in Germany next week would hardly seem cause for celebration.

After all, everyone wants peace and reconciliation, right?

But in Afghanistan, a country of whispers and secrets where war has become a way of life and loyalties change like the breeze, Tuesday's agreement can be rightly called a breakthrough.

"This is a difficult time in Afghanistan and the fact that they are willing to travel abroad in these rather challenging circumstances is a signal of flexibility, is a signal that we are in a completely different era,

a different period," Vendrell said.

Time will tell, but one thing is sure -- there is a long way to go before the United Nations sees its five-point plan for peace in post-Taliban Afghanistan become a reality, and much bigger hurdles lie ahead.

Another breakthrough will be required in Germany, for example, to get the next agreement between the disparate Afghan factions -- representing some ethnic and political rivals whose relationship is poisonous at best.

Step two under the UN plan: The conference would elect a provisional council under "an individual recognised as a symbol of national unity around whom all ethnic, religious and regional groups could rally."

It will be a breakthrough of no small measure if they see eye-to-eye on this, even though the individual in question, exiled ex-king Mohammed Zahir Shah, has already been touted by the United Nations and the United States.

Step three: The council would

propose a transitional administration, lasting no more than two years, and make security arrangements.

This would need a breakthrough big time, especially if it actually works and creates security in a country which has known nothing but war and upheaval for more than two decades.

A juicy carrot is on offer at this point, in the form of billions of dollars of international aid to rebuild the shattered nation. Without an accord at this stage, the money will stay in the bank.

Step four: The council's proposals would be endorsed by a "loya jirga", or traditional assembly of tribal chiefs, which would enable the administration to draft a new constitution.

A grand loya jirga of the type required to make such decisions will require months of talks and discussions in every village and district in Afghanistan. The meeting of such an assembly will be a breakthrough in itself, let alone an actual agreement on a meaningful constitution.

## Asteroid wiped out dinosaur

AFP, Auckland

New Zealand scientists have discovered smoking gun evidence that dinosaurs were wiped out by an asteroid which hit the world 65 million years ago.

They found the evidence, tiny bits of pollen, in coal in the remote West Coast of New Zealand's South Island.

Government-run Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences (GNS) palaeontologists Chris Hollis and Ian Raine, and Swedish researcher Vivi Vajda, have had their study published in the latest issue of the international magazine Science.

The trio focused on pollen grains preserved in exposed coal seams in a stream bank adjacent to the Moody Creek coal mine, north of Greymouth.

In a statement GNS said until now scientists believed that destruction of forests due to an "impact winter" or impact-ignited wildfires was largely confined to the American continent, within a radius of several thousand kilometres of the inferred impact site on the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico.

The New Zealand finding of the sudden death of a mixed forest and rapid recolonisation by ferns on the opposite side of the Earth to the impact site is compelling evidence that the asteroid impact caused sudden destruction of terrestrial plants world-wide.

Working on a hunch that the coal might contain the evidence they were looking for, Raine chipped off pieces of the coal seam and brought them to Wellington where microscopic pollen grains within the coal were studied.

The scientists found a mixed forest community had been abruptly replaced by a few species of fern directly after the meteorite impact.

The types of fern identified are known as early colonisers of open ground.

Geochemical analysis of the coal showed extremely high concentrations of the elements iridium, cobalt, and chromium, with the iridium concentration of 71 parts per billion the highest known for non-marine rocks anywhere in the world.

The three elements are known to be much more abundant in meteorites than in the Earth's crust. They have been found at high concentrations before in New Zealand, but only where the impact layer is preserved in marine rocks in eastern Marlborough.

"Whether the forest destruction was caused by prolonged darkness and freezing conditions associated with an impact winter, or by global outbreaks of wildfires, is a matter for further study by the research team," Hollis said.

"Either way, however, it is no longer difficult to explain the mass extinction of large herbivorous dinosaurs and their predatory cousins, especially in the southern hemisphere."

There were at least four types of dinosaur living in New Zealand, including a sauropod, theopod, hypsilophodont, and ankylosaurid.

Sixty-five million years ago New Zealand was about 1,100 kilometres (682 miles) closer to the South Pole than it is today, but several degrees warmer than today.

## Afghans unwilling to return home

AFP, Peshawar

For many Afghan refugees, living in squalid over-crowded camps in Pakistan remains preferable to returning home to an unclear political situation, a collapse of law and order and the onset of winter.

And the United Nations says they will not be forced home, despite the fall of the Taliban and efforts to assemble a broad-based government.

"People are not really willing to return at the moment," says UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) coordinator Jacques Franquin.

"They remain extremely cautious, they want to see how the situation develops."

"Furthermore, winter has arrived, and they consider that it's better to stay here for the time being. We won't push them to go back."

To return now would commit the more than 135,000 refugees who have crossed into Pakistan in the past two months to a winter of snow and sub-zero temperatures they are ill-prepared to cope with.

They would also face a war-

ravaged country where vast tracts of land are in the hands of warlords with scant loyalty to the Northern Alliance forces who have taken control in Kabul.

Since the terrorist strikes in the United States on September 11, more than 80,000 refugees have flooded into Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, and tens of thousands more around the town of Quetta in the south.

The numbers swelled in recent weeks as the Taliban retreated in the wake of US-led military strikes in Afghanistan and city after city fell to the advancing Northern Alliance.

In Peshawar, the UNHCR on Sunday began easing the pressure on a refugee camp holding up to 70,000 people at Jalozai, opening a fully-equipped site at Kotkai, capable of housing 20,000.

"More than 700 volunteers were moved in the first two days," Franquin said.

First to be relocated were Pashtuns who had been living on the edge of Jalozai camp without aid, proper shelter or clean water. At Kotkai they found tents, latrines and clean water.

"Conditions in Kotkai are much much better than in Jalozai," Franquin said.

But refugees of other ethnicities

were reluctant to move to an area peopled by Afghanistan's dominant Pashtun community, he said.

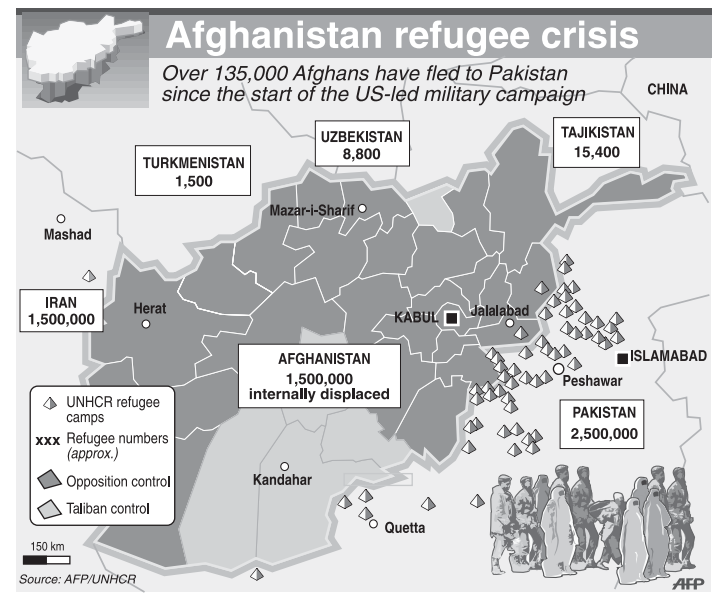


PHOTO: AFP  
Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi (R) makes a point to Congress leader Buta Singh during a rally in New Delhi on Wednesday. Sonia Gandhi said the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO) can not be supported by her Congress (I) Party in its present form.

## UN urges Afghans to avoid revenge killing, respect law

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations appealed to all forces in Afghanistan on Tuesday to respect the laws of war and avoid revenge killings, after saying it could not mediate the surrender of Taliban troops in the town of Kunduz.

"We are appealing to everyone in the country to respect humanitarian law and the laws of war and keep the killings to zero if possible," said Fred Eckhard, spokesman for UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Earlier, Annan's special representative for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, said the UN had turned down a request from Taliban commanders for it to accept the surrender of Kunduz, their only remaining position in northern Afghanistan.

"It is evident that the United Nations cannot, has no means, is not present on the ground, and simply cannot, unfortunately, accede to this request," Brahimi told reporters.

Several thousand Taliban fighters and foreign volunteers have been under siege in Kunduz for more than a week following the Islamic militia's dramatic withdrawal from the remainder of the northern provinces last week.

One of the Northern Alliance generals besieging Kunduz said that "if the United Nations or certain countries are prepared to receive the foreign militia, we can allow them to leave Afghanistan."

But General Mohammad Daoud added that "those who have committed crimes will be brought to

justice" and he rejected the Taliban's demand that they be allowed to leave Kunduz in a convoy to their southern stronghold of Kandahar.

Brahimi said Annan had asked the besieging forces "to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and to treat this question with as much humanity as possible."

The message was sent through the UN envoy to Afghanistan, Francesc Vendrell, who arrived in Kabul, the Afghan capital, on Saturday.

Eckhard said Annan had also been "in touch with the coalition forces who have a presence in Afghanistan," referring to US and British forces pursuing the suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, an ally of the Taliban.

Annan "spoke to US Secretary of State Colin Powell for one," Eckhard said.

The secretary general had also been in touch with the International Committee of the Red Cross, which has primary responsibility for the surrender of combatants or prisoners of war, he added.

"The UN is just beginning to send its international humanitarian workers back into Afghanistan," Eckhard said.

"All we are trying to do is facilitate, A) the people whose job it is to deal with this, and B) some people in the coalition who could provide practical support and see what they can do to respond to this request," he added.