

Manila begins talks with MNLF to win release of 50 hostages

27 people killed during fighting in S Philippines



A mother, with her two children, begs an armed follower of Muslim leader Nur Misuari to release them on Tuesday in Zamboanga. The gunmen, who seized at least 50 people captives and used them as human shields, herded their hostages out of the government complex they had occupied since last week.

AFP, Manila

The Philippine government on Tuesday launched talks with armed followers of detained Muslim leader Nur Misuari who are holding dozens of hostages after attacking the southern city of Zamboanga.

Abraham Iribani, an official in a Muslim self-rule area in the country's south, said on local television that he had met with the leader of the gunmen, Julhambri Misuari, and asked him to free the captives.

"We told them that they should release the hostages and they can leave without any bloodshed," Iribani said on ABS-CBN television.

Julhambri Misuari is the nephew of Nur Misuari, a Muslim former guerrilla leader who last week led a failed revolt in the southern island of Jolo, near Zamboanga, that left more than 100 people dead.

The younger Misuari led dozens of fighters from a faction of the Moro National Liberation Front in taking over a government complex in Zamboanga last week after the failed revolt in Jolo.

The group early Tuesday

launched attacks on army positions in Zamboanga after a military deadline to vacate the place by midnight Monday lapsed.

They then seized about 50 hostages, whom they used as human shields to thwart a military counter-attack.

Iribani said the gunmen did not have any demands and only wanted to leave the complex without being attacked by the military.

Meanwhile, at least 27 people were killed and 15 others wounded Tuesday when armed followers of detained Muslim leader Nur Misuari clashed with government forces in the southern Philippine city of Zamboanga, the military said.

Twenty-five Misuari followers, a soldier and a civilian were killed, while the rest of the gunmen fled with civilian hostages, Brigadier General Edilberto Adan told reporters.

Military gunships and airplanes bombarded the complex and ground troops surrounded the area by noon to besiege the renegade members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

Nepal threatens life-term for terrorists

Indian states put border on red alert

AP, Katmandu

A day after the king declared a state of emergency to fight a Maoist insurgency, the government issued a notice Tuesday threatening life in prison for anyone involved in terrorism.

"Under the ordinance issued, those involved in acts of terrorism or those helping these people would be punished with life imprisonment," the notice said.

On Monday, King Gyanendra declared a state of emergency suspending civil rights and allowing the use of the military against Maoists rebels who killed at least 76 soldiers, policemen and government officials over the weekend.

Previously the military was limited to defending Nepal from foreign attack, and police were used to fight the rebels. Now the army can use force if it suspects anyone of involvement in acts of terror, the notice said.

The emergency measures also restricted press freedom and suspended the right to information and property and the right to privacy.

Under Tuesday's notice any suspect can be arrested without a warrant and detained for 90 days without framing charges and no court order would be needed to

search anyone's home or property.

People found involved in extortion or threatening life and property would be considered terrorists and would be punished under the new law, the notice warned.

Reuters adds: India has stepped up security on its border with Nepal to prevent Maoist guerrillas fighting to topple the monarchy in the Himalayan kingdom from crossing into its territory, officials said on Tuesday.

Border guards and police have been alerted in the eastern states of West Bengal and Sikkim and in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, officials said.

"We are keeping a watch to prevent Maoists from entering," said a state police official in West Bengal's northern district of Darjeeling, which has a 100 km border with Nepal.

He said police were checking hospitals and private nursing homes in the district's main town, Siliguri to find out if any injured Maoist cadres from Nepal had been admitted.

Nepal's King Gyanendra declared a state of emergency on Tuesday after a spate of attacks by Maoist rebels over the weekend.

India keen on role in new Afghan set-up: Vajpayee

AFP, New Delhi

India wants a "maximum role" in the establishment of a non-aligned and fully representative post-Taliban government in Afghanistan, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Tuesday.

"We are making efforts so that we have maximum possible role," Vajpayee said during a parliamentary debate on New Delhi's Afghan policy, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

India does not want any future Afghan government to allow terrorist activities to take place on its soil, Vajpayee told the upper house.

New Delhi has launched an aggressive diplomatic campaign for a greater say in a post-Taliban set-up - announcing a 100 million dollar preliminary aid package for the reconstruction of the war-torn country.

Last week, India became only the third country to establish a diplomatic mission in Kabul, following the retreat of the Taliban from the Afghan capital on November 13.

It also dispatched a team of

military doctors and nurses and a large quantity of medicines to Afghanistan.

India's special envoy on Afghanistan, Satinder K. Lambah has held talks with Afghanistan's deposed king Mohammed Zahir Shah and established contacts with some Pashtun tribal leaders.

Lambah has also maintained regular dialogue with the Northern Alliance, according to a senior Indian diplomat.

India, like Russia and Iran, has long backed the Northern Alliance in its battle with the Pakistan-supported Taliban, which took power in Kabul in September 1996.

Lambah is attending the UN-sponsored inter-Afghan conference in Germany as an observer.

Vajpayee also denied media reports that quoted him as saying he favoured the inclusion of moderate Taliban elements in a new government.

Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh has dismissed the concept of a "moderate Taliban" as an oxymoron.

Confce on rebuilding Afghanistan opens

AFP, Islamabad

International donors and development experts pledged Tuesday to help Afghanistan rebuild its shattered economy as Afghan parties gathered a continent away to plot out the country's political future.

The pledges came at a three-day conference aimed at taking the first steps to getting Afghanistan back on its feet after two decades of Russian occupation, factional wars and the US-led drive on terrorism.

It coincides with UN-sponsored talks in Germany involving leaders of Afghanistan's complex patchwork of ethnic, military and political groups on the establishment of a transitional government topping the agenda.

The Islamabad conference, titled "Preparing for Afghanistan's Reconstruction," opened at a hotel in the Pakistani capital with the singing of Koranic verses by a nine-year-old Afghan, named as Rashid.

The meeting, organised jointly by

the World Bank, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Asian Development Bank, will seek to allay fears that the US-led war against terrorism has merely served to further pulverise Afghanistan, already ravaged by two decades of war.

"We have not come here to tell people how they should rebuild their country or we would merely become part of the problem for Afghanistan," Miekko Nishimizu, World Bank vice president for the South Asia region, told around 200 delegates at the opening session.

"Imagine Afghanistan in peace, that is a dream we share with the people of Afghanistan," she said.

"The time has come to listen to their voices, I do mean listening to the sovereign people of Afghanistan."

Yoshihiro Iwasaki, programmes director for the western region of the Asian Development Bank, said the ADB was ready to support the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

UNSC unlikely go for smart sanctions on Iraq

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council is unlikely to revise sanctions on Iraq when it extends the oil-for-food programme this week, diplomats said Monday.

In July, Russia blocked an attempt by the United States and Britain to replace the 11-year-old trade embargo on Iraq with so-called "smart sanctions" penalising the government rather than ordinary Iraqi citizens.

The current phase of the oil-for-food programme expires at midnight New York time on Friday (0400 GMT Saturday) and diplomats said the council was likely to extend it without major changes.

"We will probably have a draft resolution on Tuesday and could adopt it later in the week," one diplomat said.

But he added that the programme would not necessarily be extended for the customary period of six months.

The Security Council's action comes amid a new push by Washington to force Baghdad to allow the resumption of UN inspec-

tions of its weapons program.

In Washington, US President George W. Bush warned Iraqi President Saddam Hussein he must allow the return of UN arms inspectors to see if Baghdad is developing chemical, biological or nuclear arms.

There have been no UN arms inspectors in Iraq since December 1998, when the former commission, known as UNSCOM, pulled out on the eve of a bombing campaign by the United States and Britain.

Asked what consequences Saddam would face if he refuses, the US leader curtly replied: "He'll find out."

The proposed sanctions reforms blocked by Russia would scrap the 11-year-old UN embargo on trade with Iraq while tightening controls to prevent crude oil smuggling out of Iraq and illegal arms imports into the country.

Russia objected in particular to a goods review list, which the United States and Britain want annexed to a new resolution on sanctions, to deny Iraq civilian supplies with a military potential.

North, South Korean troops exchange fire

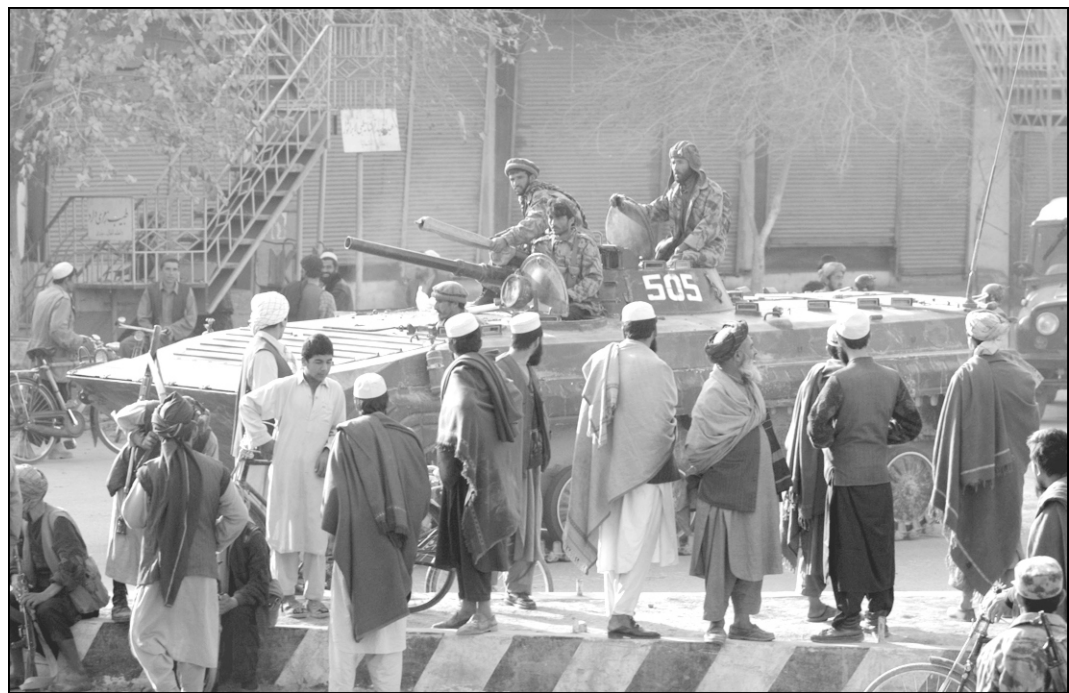
AFP, Seoul

North and South Korean troops exchanged fire in the sensitive inter-Korean buffer zone Tuesday as relations between the two Koreas sunk to their lowest ebb since last year's landmark peace talks.

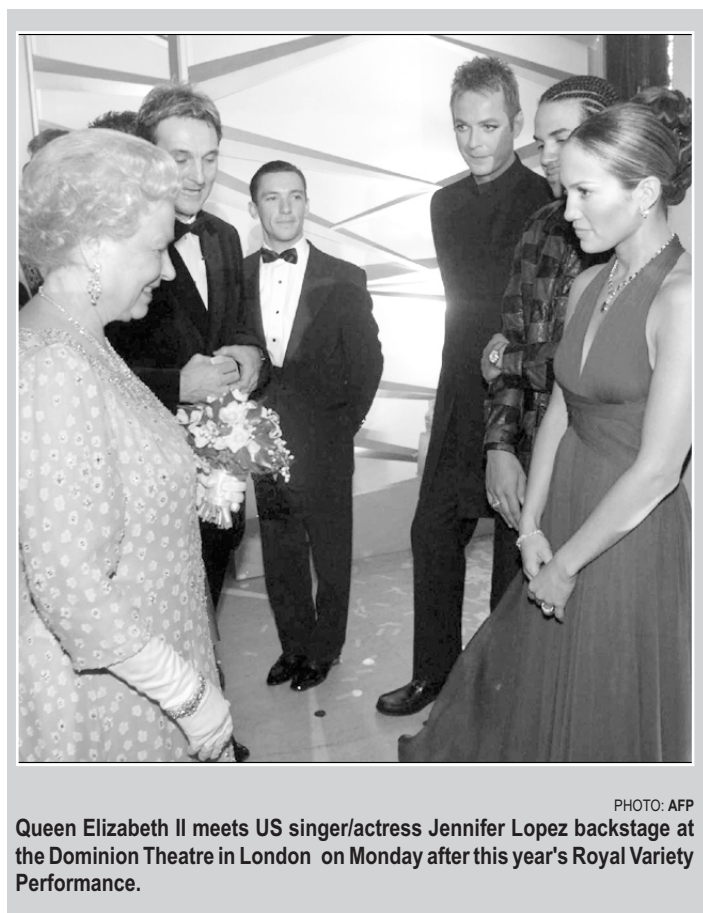
The brief exchange of fire inside the demilitarised zone (DMZ), which divides the Korean peninsula, was triggered by North Korea, UN and South Korean officials said.

The first shots in three years and five months inside the Cold War frontier, at 10.42am (0142 GMT), came amid growing tension caused by the South's security alert following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

There were no casualties on the South Korean side, a defence ministry spokesman said, adding that an investigation was launched to determine if the shooting near the truce village of Panmunjom was deliberate.



Northern Alliance soldiers enter Kunduz, the Taliban's last redoubt in northern Afghanistan, aboard an armoured vehicle on Monday. Northern Alliance troops fought a fierce battle here Monday with die-hard Taliban militia that left about 100 soldiers dead on both sides, a Northern Alliance commander said. Around 5,750 Taliban fighters and foreign mercenaries surrendered to Afghan opposition forces in Kunduz Monday, Olim Razzm, an aide to Northern Alliance leader Rashid Dostam at Mazar-i-Sharif told AFP.



Queen Elizabeth II meets US singer/actress Jennifer Lopez backstage at the Dominion Theatre in London on Monday after this year's Royal Variety Performance.

Rabbani eyes talks with Musharraf

AFP, Dubai

Acting Afghan president and Northern Alliance leader Burhanuddin Rabbani said Tuesday he might hold talks with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf "in the very near future."

"Moves are underway to pave the way for talks with Musharraf. When this will happen I don't know," Rabbani told reporters in Dubai, where he is heading a visiting delegation that met with Pakistani officials.

But these efforts "could be very fruitful in the very near future," he said.

"We are ready to open a new page with all our neighbours, especially Pakistan. We will never forget the help of Pakistan in the past ... We are ready to cooperate and we are eager to strengthen our relationship with them."

"During the Taliban rule, there were some errors committed by (Pakistani) persons, not populations. People come and go (while) populations stay," Rabbani said.

Rabbani met with Dubai's Crown

Prince and UAE Defense Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum Monday on the latest developments in Afghanistan.

He reiterated his lack of enthusiasm for a UN-sponsored conference that opened Tuesday in the German city of Bonn on the future of the war-torn country.

"Negotiations are taking place now that I want in Afghanistan. People outside Afghanistan should not be afraid to come to Afghanistan to try to solve problems."

"As of today, all our meetings should be held in Afghanistan," he said, calling the Bonn gathering a "preliminary meeting (to lay down) the basis of future meetings."

"It is not realistic to think any decisions made will be final ... because the delegates have limited authority."

He added: "I think they'll reach some results and agree on some issues (such as) the mechanism to solve the Afghanistan problem, the type of government and a commitment to lead the country in the meantime ... and where the next meeting will be held."

Swedish TV4 cameraman killed in Taloqan

AFP, Stockholm

A Swedish television news cameraman working for semi-public channel TV4 was killed in Taloqan in northern Afghanistan late Monday, TV4 said.

Ulf Stroemberg, 42, was shot during a robbery on the house where he was staying. He died of his wounds shortly after the attack, TV4 spokeswoman Eva Franchell told AFP.

"Ulf Stroemberg was killed during a robbery," she said. His family has been informed.

Several other journalists were also in the house at the time of the robbery, but no other injuries were reported.

The killing brings to eight the number of journalists killed since allied bombing began on October 7 to flush out terror-suspect Osama bin Laden.

Four journalists, an Australian, an Afghan, an Italian and a Spaniard, were killed in an ambush in eastern Afghanistan on November 19.

Laden's threat puts US gas industry on alert

AFP, Washington

A threat from suspected terror mastermind Osama bin Laden has put the US natural gas industry on high alert, prompting the FBI and industry officials to beef up security around pipelines and other facilities, officials said late Monday.

"We received information that Osama bin Laden may have approved a plan to attack natural gas supplies in the United States," a Federal Bureau of Investigation official told AFP.

The tip, received from intelligence sources, prompted the FBI to issue an electronic advisory to all FBI field offices on November 17, according to the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The officials refused to disclose specific measures taken by companies and law enforcement agencies but insisted that "the people in the field would take the needed steps."

The alert came as top US government officials, including President George W. Bush, told Americans the "noose" sprung by

US special forces and CIA teams around bin Laden, the Afghan-based leader of the al-Qaeda terror network, was "tightening" and he was constantly on the run to avoid death or capture.

US Attorney General John Ashcroft, who broke the news about the gas industry alert to reporters earlier in the day, qualified the tip as "unsubstantiated" but noted that the US government was not going to casually dismiss it.

"Frankly, those are the kinds of reports which we take seriously, but we process, and we work to elevate our security to alert the interested industry groups, to alert law enforcement," Ashcroft said.

He said the FBI and other law enforcement officials were in contact with the gas, oil and other sensitive US industries on a weekly basis discussing joint security efforts.

"Our ability to be successful, at least over the last several months of avoiding additional terrorist attacks, I believe, is a result of that kind of effort," the attorney general said.

"We're especially always concerned as it relates to things that might have substantial hazard, and some of our energy potentials have substantial hazard," he added.

The United States has 288,000 km of gas pipelines, interspersed with compressor stations, that move huge amounts of natural gas from producing regions to local utilities, according to the Interstate Natural Gas Association of America.

In addition, the industry, which serves individual homes and nearly five million US businesses, uses scores of underground storage facilities and processing plants that could become targets of choice for terrorists.

The association said the industry had instituted heightened security measures immediately following the September 11 attacks.

"While pipeline companies and employees across the nation are on a heightened state of alert, we continue to monitor and patrol the pipelines regularly via aircraft, vehicles, and/or on foot," the group said in a statement.

N Alliance bans women's Kabul march Afghan war 'just beginning' of US anti-terror campaign: Bush

AFP, Kabul

A planned women's freedom march through the streets of Kabul on Tuesday was banned by Northern Alliance interior minister Younis Qanooni, organisers said, setting back their hopes for restored liberty.

"They said it was for security but that is just a pretext ... they don't want women to improve," said Soraya Parlika, who runs the newly formed Union of Women in Afghanistan.

Parlika said Qanooni personally rang her two days ago, before leaving for the talks on Afghanistan's future outside Bonn, and said the march was not to go ahead.

"He said we should wait for an unspecified time."

As women began gathering at her home early Tuesday, hopeful the decision would be reversed, Parlika received a follow-up call from an interior ministry official again refusing the march.

It was the second time in a week the women had been refused permission to walk from Parlika's suburban home to the main United Nations compound, with security given as the reason both times.

"I don't believe that. There would not be a problem, we have no need for security," Parlika said.

About 50 members of the newly formed Union of Women in Afghanistan were packed into her apartment, many of them wearing light head-scarves instead of the much-hated burqa, the all-encompassing garment covering the face and body which women were forced to wear after the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996.

They were among the first to show their faces outdoors in the capital after the Northern Alliance retook the city on November 13.

Although the Northern Alliance, not as hardline as the Taliban, has told women they were free, the statement was received with scepticism.

"They announced that women are free, but it is not freedom to throw off our veils. That is not the liberty we want," said a disappointed Nafeesa, 17,



Three Afghan women discuss on Tuesday after they were not allowed by the Northern Alliance to stage a rally in the Afghan capital Kabul.

who has received no formal education for the past five years.

"Right now the situation in Kabul is not good. It is not what we wanted."

Under the Taliban, women were banned from attending schools and universities, denied the right to work, and countless widows from two decades of war were forced to rely on relief aid or turn to begging to support their families.

AP, Washington

President George W. Bush said the US-led war in Afghanistan is "just the beginning" of the fight against terrorism, and he warned Iraq and North Korea there would be consequences for producing weapons of mass destruction.

The president, asked Monday about Iraq and about potential military targets beyond the Afghanistan war, expanded on the list of ways a country can get crosswise with the US-led coalition against terrorism.

"If anybody harbours a terrorist, they're a terrorist," he said. "If they fund a terrorist, they're a terrorist. If they house terrorists, they're terrorists. I mean, I can't make it any more clear to other nations around the world."

"If they develop weapons of mass destruction that will be used to

terrorize nations, they will be held accountable," the president said. That remark spelled out a new condition for countries that want to avoid being labeled pro-terrorist.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Bush was relating long-held views - not suggesting new policy or signaling post-Afghanistan plans.

Senior administration officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, did not dispute Fleischer but said Bush's remarks reflected a growing consensus at the White House that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could be the greatest hurdle in America's war on terrorism unless he moves on the weapons issue.

Aides fearing Bush's comments would upset US allies reluctant to back action against Iraq said late Monday that Saddam is not necessarily the next target after

Afghanistan. Other countries that harbour terrorists, such as Somalia, or need help to curb terrorism in their countries, such as Yemen, are just as likely to receive Bush's attention once the Afghanistan campaign is complete, they said.

The president was asked whether he had a message for Saddam as the administration looks toward the next phase of the US campaign.

"My message is... that if you harbour a terrorist, you're a terrorist," Bush said. "If you develop weapons of mass destruction that you want to terrorize the world, you'll be held accountable." Some advisers are pushing Bush to make Iraq his next target. Many of those aides worked for Bush's father who led the country through the Persian Gulf War that ended with Saddam's promise to stop producing weapons

of mass destruction and to open his nation to inspectors.

On Iraq, Bush urged Saddam to allow weapons inspectors into the country "to prove to the world he's not developing weapons of mass destruction."

Asked what will happen if Saddam refuses, Bush replied, "He'll find out."

Iraq's UN ambassador, Mohammed al-Douri, said the Iraqi government will not allow UN weapons inspectors to return as long as the Security Council maintains sanctions imposed after Saddam's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

"Our position is very clear on that question - that we will not permit any... weapons inspectors," he said. "We have nothing to inspect."

Bush said the leaders of North Korea must allow inspectors in if they want good relations with the United States.