

Omar asks Taliban to fight till death

AP, Kabul

Targeted by deadly air strikes and on the run from US-backed northern alliance forces, the Taliban leadership is trying hard to bolster support inside its southern Afghan heartland where rival tribal leaders want low-ranking Islamic militia fighters to defect.

Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, who apparently escaped the massive bombardment of a command bunker near his stronghold of Kandahar on Tuesday, has reportedly ordered his men to "fight to the death" despite the participation of growing numbers of elite US and other western troops and advisers in the conflict.

"We are ready to face these Americans. We are happy that they have landed here and we will teach them a lesson," one Taliban official quoted Omar as saying in a radio message to his field commanders.

Despite Omar's defiance, anti-Taliban leaders in the south say local Pashtun tribal chiefs are recruiting some Taliban fighters into their own ranks.

Switching loyalties during wartime has a long tradition in highly tribalized Afghanistan and residents contacted in Kandahar and elsewhere say Taliban troops appeared

increasingly demoralized as casualties mount and bombing raids continue.

Nevertheless, it was unclear on Thursday how many members of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida force have changed sides. Efforts to erode support for bin Laden may have been hampered by deep-rooted tribal rivalry that long predates the formation of the Taliban movement in the early 1990s.

In the southern border town of Spinboldak, Taliban negotiators broke off talks with Pashtun tribesmen about a possible surrender there on Wednesday after non-Taliban leaders refused to guarantee the safety of Arabs loyal to bin Laden, said tribal official Mohammed Anwar.

However, other sources said the talks failed because of squabbling between the Achakzai and Nurzai tribes that each want to control Spinboldak, which strategically sits astride the Taliban's last major supply route from neighbouring Pakistan to the east.

On a broader scale, political rivalry is also holding back efforts by the United Nations to shape a peaceful future for Afghanistan.

In talks in Germany, the northern alliance has opposed a plan to deploy foreign peacekeepers, saying its own fighters can provide

national security.

By rejecting an international force, the northern alliance has put itself at odds with three other Afghan factions involved in negotiations to form a new coalition government.

A major factor affecting morale within the Taliban and al-Qaida is an escalating number of casualties, both by US bombing and in direct combat.

In Washington, Pentagon officials said more than half a dozen senior leaders within al-Qaida as well as several hundred of bin Laden's most loyal fighters have been killed so far.

But thousands of foreign al-Qaida fighters are still operating in Afghanistan and have apparently mixed in with Afghan Taliban fighters.

"There will always be pockets that are going to fight to the death," said Rear Adm. John Stufflebeem. "But getting the leadership and breaking the chain of command is going to render much of that ineffective."

In the north, hundreds of bin Laden fighters were killed during a three-day prisoner-of-war uprising near Mazar-e-Sharif following their weekend surrender around the city of Kunduz.

Some northern alliance fighters removed bonds from the hands of dead fighters before

giving their bodies to the Red Cross on Wednesday. But a key alliance leader, Gen. Rashid Dostum, dismissed suggestions of an atrocity and insisted that his troops had treated the prisoners humanely and in accordance with human rights before the rebellion erupted.

Amnesty International has demanded an inquiry.

CIA officer Johnny M. Spann was killed in the uprising -- the first American combat death of the conflict that was launched following terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11.

US military officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said infantry from the US Army's 10th Mountain Division have crossed from Uzbekistan into northern Afghanistan to help protect other Americans in dangerous areas near two air bases.

One force near Mazar-e-Sharif is made up of no more than two dozen soldiers, the officials said. The other unit at the Bagram airfield north of Kabul has about the same number.

More such rapid response teams probably will be used in other areas of Afghanistan, one official said.



Army personnel inspect a factory after a bomb blast at the Coca Cola plant by Maoists in Kathmandu on Thursday. Maoists exploded two bombs in the factory.

8 BSF men, 14 militants killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Fourteen separatist Muslim militants, eight security force personnel and two children were killed in Indian-administered Kashmir overnight and Thursday, most of them in fighting, police said.

Seven Indian border guards including two officers were killed in an overnight gunbattle with Muslim separatist militants in north Kashmir.

Two other guards were wounded in the clash at Achibal village, 50 kilometres (31 miles) north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar.

Three militants were also killed during the six-hour encounter.

Peres publicly criticises Sharon

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's dovish foreign minister, Shimon Peres, publicly criticised right-wing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon over his approach to a ceasefire with the Palestinians late Wednesday, on the eve of the premier's trip to Washington. "Negotiations to reach a ceasefire must have complex, serious and emotional dimensions, and it's on this point that I differ from the prime minister", he told a meeting of his Labour party, adding that the disagreement was not personal.

Sharon has said ceasefire talks should be a purely security affair to defuse the Palestinian uprising, or intifada, and open the door to political negotiations with the Palestinians.

'US helicopter did not violate Indian airspace'

AFP, New Delhi

A US navy helicopter, which aviation authorities here said violated Indian airspace and flew over a nuclear facility, was outside Indian territorial waters when it conducted its mission, a top US naval commander said Thursday.

"The USS John Young was coming in for a port call port with full permission from the Indian authorities," Admiral Dennis C. Blair, commander-in-chief of the US Pacific Command, told reporters.

"It put up a helicopter for final training and it flew well outside Indian territory," said Blair, who is on a three-day visit to India.

"The flight was conducted over international waters. The helicopter has not flown over any Indian facility," Blair said.

UN envoy meets Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

UN envoy to Myanmar Razali Ismail met democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi Thursday as he attempted to speed up the pace of reconciliation between the opposition and ruling junta.

The Malaysian diplomat entered the lakeside villa of the National League for Democracy (NLD) leader at about 11:00 am (0430 GMT) and stayed for two hours, a source in Yangon said.

Razali was expected to meet with her for a second time, possibly on December 2, the source added.

He would leave on December 3, cutting short his trip by one day, the UN confirmed.

There have also been unconfirmed reports that Razali is planning a trip to Shan state in the north on Friday, a public holiday in Myanmar.



Residents wait next to campaign posters of opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe on Wednesday ahead of a campaign rally in Colombo. Sri Lankans will head to the polls on December 5 to elect their 225-member Parliament.

Afghan factions mull multinational force

AFP, Bonn

Afghan factions holding power-sharing talks in Germany Wednesday raised the possibility of a multinational force in Afghanistan, where US marines set up a dragnet to trap any fleeing terrorists.

In the north of the war-ravaged country, US-backed Northern Alliance forces put down a three-day uprising by prisoners, killing hundreds of fighters loyal to the ousted government while losing dozens of their own troops.

A CIA operative also died in the clashes, the first confirmed American combat casualty in the seven-week-old US-led military campaign.

The United States has targeted the hardline Taliban regime for supporting Saudi-born Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaida network or Islamic militants who are accused of planning the September 11 attacks on US cities.

Opposition forces and tribal leaders have taken control of most of the country in recent weeks, leaving the Taliban besieged in the southern city of Kandahar.

With the Taliban in disarray, rival Afghan factions meeting at a hilltop hotel outside Bonn Wednesday held a second day of talks aimed at forming a broad-based government in the ethnically divided country.

Addressing two key stumbling blocks, the Northern Alliance said it was ready to accept a role for former king Mohammed Zahir Shah, and left open the possibility of a multinational force for Afghanistan.

Yunus Qanooi, who heads the alliance delegation, said, however, that there could be no decision in Bonn on the role of the former king, who has been touted as a unifying figure.

"We don't believe in the role of personalities, we believe in systems," he told reporters. "But if it were decided in the Loya Jirga (tribal council) that the king should have a role then nobody can deny it."

He was also cautious on the possible deployment of a multinational force.

"At the moment there is no need... although it can in principle be part of a comprehensive peace package," he said.

The alliance had previously objected to the idea of such a force, but appeared to have shifted its position amid international pressure.

Diplomatic sources said they made it plain that there would be no major reconstruction aid until security improved.

Arabs fear backlash if US attacks Iraq

AFP, Amman

Veiled threats by US President George W. Bush against Iraq have triggered alarm bells in Arab capitals, fuelling fears that a military operation on Baghdad could destabilise the region.

Bush on Monday demanded that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein accept the return of UN weapons inspectors to prove that he is not trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

Asked what would happen if Saddam refused, Bush replied: "He'll find out."

On Wednesday US officials refused to spell out the full meaning of the president's words and intentions, adding to the anxiety that has gripped Arab capitals.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said that Bush's statement was "clear, declaratory and not requiring amplification", while his spokesman Richard Boucher stressed that Washington was watching Iraq "very, very closely".

Several Arab allies of Washington have already told US officials that a

strike on Iraq will have "catastrophic" repercussions for the region and could directly threaten their own regimes.

One such is King Abdullah II of Jordan, Iraq's tiny and cash-strapped western neighbour which depends largely on Baghdad for its oil supplies and trade links.

"We have explained to the (anti-terrorism) coalition the great catastrophe if an Arab country is hit," the king told AFP in an exclusive interview in October, when asked about the possibility of an Arab country, notably Iraq, being attacked.

On Tuesday, Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara of Syria, another neighbour of Iraq, warned that "any strike against an Arab country, wherever it comes from, will bring on endless problems."

A military operation against Iraq, a sworn enemy of Washington since the Gulf War of 1991, "would mean the end of the understanding on how to fight against terrorism," Arab League Secretary General Amr Mussa also said Tuesday.

US seeks 'dynamic' ties with India

AFP, New Delhi

The United States is seeking a "dynamic and non-traditional" military relationship with India focussed on serving the interests of both countries, a top US naval commander said Thursday.

Admiral Dennis Blair, commander-in-chief of the US Pacific Command also described India as a "great and rising power" which would have to play a more complex and demanding role in Asia than in the past.

"We are not looking for a defence treaty," Blair told reporters here on

the second day of his visit to India.

"We are looking for cooperation on security matters that serve the interests of both our countries... a more dynamic, non-traditional relationship than in the past."

In a speech to industrial leaders, Blair said a "major purpose" of his visit was to discuss long-term security cooperation between Indian and US armed forces.

"We believe that a robust US-India defence relationship... can play an important part in contributing to peace, security and freedom in Asia."

He said this would include pro-

tection of energy supplies and sealanes, peacekeeping and preparing for unforeseen crises.

"We will develop our relationship with India on the basis of India's emergence as a rising global power," he said.

Blair's visit, the second in two months, follows a summit meeting between Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and US President George W. Bush in Washington on November 9, which set out cooperation in defence, space and energy as priority areas. In September, Bush partially lifted US sanctions against India and Pakistan which

were imposed in May 1998 after the two countries carried out tit-for-tat nuclear weapons tests.

US ambassador to India, Robert D. Blackwill, said recently that US restrictions on the sale of military supplies to India were likely to be lifted soon.

Blair, who held talks with Defence Minister George Fernandes, Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani and Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh on Wednesday, said Washington sought to work closely with New Delhi on "multilateral security" issues.

Blast at Coke plant in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels Thursday bombed a Coca-Cola factory on the outskirts of Kathmandu in their first attack on the capital since Nepal's government declared a state of emergency this week.

The Maoists planted two bombs at the site, causing some damage to the factory. Noone was killed or injured, officials said.

N. N. Singh, the manager of the plant at the Balju Industrial Estate, said six armed Maoists planted the pipebombs after threatening to kill the factory's night guards.

The rebels told the six guards that "if they made any noise they would be killed, so the guards could not do anything."

"Then one of them entered the bottle cleaning plant while others started laying other explosives at two or three places, but only two bombs exploded," Singh said.

He added that engineers were assessing the extent of damage "but the explosion was very powerful and blew off the roof of the factory".

After planting the bombs the Maoists fled from the scene, the management said.

US House okays \$20b fund to fight terror

REUTERS, Washington

Rallying behind President George W. Bush, the House of Representatives on Wednesday passed a \$20 billion emergency package to respond to the September 11 attacks after rejecting Democrats' push to add billions more for homeland security and for New York.

After Republicans narrowly defeated a bid by Democrats to pour \$24 billion more into the bill, the House on a bipartisan 406-20 vote cleared the emergency package, the last instalment of a \$40 billion plan Congress approved after the hijack strikes on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Also passed with that vote was a \$318 billion annual defense spending bill, which lawmakers want to move quickly to support the effort to destroy the network of Saudi militant Osama bin Laden, Washington's prime suspect in the attacks that killed nearly 4,000 people.

War on terror should not be expanded at will: China

AFP, Beijing

China Thursday warned that the war on terrorism should not be expanded at will, reacting to speculation that the United States might add Iraq to its list of military targets.

"We are against expanding the attacks at will," foreign ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue told a regular press briefing.

Her statement came after US President George W. Bush warned that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein must allow UN arms inspectors back in Iraq to prove he is

not developing weapons of mass destruction.

Asked what consequences a refusal would bring, the US leader curtly replied: "He'll find out."

The cryptic reply fuelled speculation that the regime in Baghdad might be next on Washington's list of targets after Afghanistan, in a campaign launched in response to the September 11 attacks on the United States.

Zhang said that China remained a supporter of the war against terrorism, but reaffirmed Chinese caveats.

US to buy 155 m doses of smallpox vaccine

AFP, Washington

The US government has contracted to buy 155 million doses of smallpox vaccine for 428 million dollars in order to create a supply to vaccinate every American, the Department of Health and Human Services announced Wednesday.

Officials said the contract with Acambis Inc was part of plans to obtain 286 million doses of the vaccine by the end of 2002, enough to protect every American from the deadly disease.

Acambis and subcontractor Baxter International have agreed to produce the vaccine by then at a cost of 2.76 dollars per dose, officials said.

Concerns over bioterrorism have brought renewed focus on smallpox, a deadly disease declared eradicated by the World Health Organization in 1980.



Singer and composer Elton John at the dedication of a commemorative display marking his record-breaking performance on Wednesday at Madison Square Garden in New York. John performed his 53rd show at the Garden on Wednesday breaking the previous record of 52 performances held by the Grateful Dead since 1994. John's first concert at the Garden was on September 23, 1973.

Kostunica reluctant to hand over war criminals

AFP, London

Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica signalled Wednesday he was unwilling to hand over alleged war criminals to The Hague international war crimes tribunal, saying that he was against "selective justice".

Speaking in London, Kostunica also denied that indicted Bosnian Serb war criminal Ratko Mladic was living in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and also spoke out against independence for Kosovo.

UN war crimes prosecutor Carla Del Ponte on Tuesday accused the Yugoslav army of sheltering Mladic, and said she knew he was living in Belgrade.

60 rebels killed in Burundi

AFP, Bujumbura

Burundi's army has killed more than 50 rebels in an offensive this week against rebels of the National Liberation Forces (FNL) just outside the capital Bujumbura, a military source said.

Troops on Monday launched the offensive, which was continuing to rage in the Tenga forest just outside the capital, an officer, who asked to remain anonymous, told AFP late Wednesday.

At least 10 soldiers have also been killed, the officer said.

Hot acts under ice cap!

REUTERS, Washington

Deep below the frozen surface of the Arctic Ocean, scientists aboard a US Coast Guard icebreaker discovered a searing caldron of activity, including numerous underwater volcanoes and deep-sea hot springs that may harbour previously unknown marine organisms.

The findings about the hot times under the polar ice cap were presented on Wednesday by scientists who participated in the nine-week Arctic Mid-Ocean Ridge Expedition funded by the US National Science Foundation.

The scientists mapped and studied the Gakkel Ridge, which runs for 1,100 miles (1,760 kms) from north of Greenland to Siberia beneath the Arctic ice cap. It is the deepest and most remote portion of the global mid-ocean ridge system.

Ocean ridges represent great gashes in the Earth, running tens of

thousands of miles on ocean basis, where the titanic tectonic plates of the Earth are pulled apart, forcing molten rock from deep within the planet's interior to rise up between them and produce strings of volcanoes.

Defying expectations, the Gakkel Ridge turned out to be highly volcanically active. The researchers discovered and mapped 12 previously unknown underwater volcanoes. They also retrieved evidence of a vast field of undersea vents known as "black smokers" each serving as a super-heated oasis of life on the floor below the frigid Arctic Ocean.

The findings made during a mission to the frozen top of the planet "greatly expand our understanding and knowledge of our Earth," researcher Henry Dick of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts said at a news conference.



Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz (L) greets Jordan's King Abdullah II, as Jordanian Prime Minister Ali Abu Ragheb passes in the center, before their meeting in Riyadh early Thursday. The Jordanian monarch paid a brief visit to the kingdom for talks on the latest Arab and international developments in relation to the stalled Middle East process.