

US jets step up Kandahar blitz

5 US troops killed in suicide attack: Taliban

AFP, Quetta

Kandahar city came under one of the heaviest bombardments yet Saturday while US planes also attacked suspected Al-Qaida hideouts in the province, a top opposition commander said.

"The US warplanes attacked special Al-Qaida network targets in the hill areas," Gul Lali, a key lieutenant to former Kandahar governor Gul Agha, told AFP.

The bombing continued throughout the night and into the early hours of Saturday morning.

Lali, who has been fighting in Kandahar province and claims to have many sources in the city, said that some three dozen people had been killed - a combination of Taliban troops and civilians. His claim could not be independently verified.

The commander also said that around another 100 US ground troops had been flown into an airstrip captured last weekend, some 20 kilometers (12 miles) from the city, bringing the number up to around 1,100.

Suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaida network is blamed by the US for the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington.

US officials believe the 44-year-old bin Laden may be hiding out either in the mountains around Kandahar or in an elaborate complex of caves in eastern Afghanistan near the city of Jalalabad.

Lali also said that representatives of local tribal elder Hamid Karzai, a former deputy foreign minister, were holding talks with the Taliban in a bid to persuade the militia to hand over power in Kandahar without major bloodshed.

Meanwhile, the Taliban claimed Saturday to have killed five US special forces soldiers in a suicide attack in Afghanistan's Kandahar province, the Baluchistan Times reported.

The five were killed during an attack near an airstrip about 20 kilometers (12 miles) out of Kandahar city, the Taliban's commander of frontier affairs Maulvi Aminullah told the Pakistani paper.

US forces secured Dolangi airstrip last weekend and hundreds of Marines have since been flown in.

"Five US special forces personnel were killed while eight Taliban embraced martyrdom in the attack," Aminullah said, without elaborating.

He also said that US forces had been engaged in fighting with Taliban troops in desert areas of the province, the spiritual heartland of the fundamentalist Islamic militia.

He did not give any details but said there had been no fighting in Kandahar city itself.

Kandahar has come under increasingly heavy bombardment in recent days, according to witnesses at the Pakistan-Afghan border. Some three-quarters of its population is thought to have fled the city since the start of the US-led bombing campaign seven weeks ago.

Breakthrough in embryonic stem cell research

AFP, Paris

Scientists reported Friday a breakthrough in transforming embryonic stem cells -- the "master" cells touted as a potential wonder treatment for crippling disorders -- into brain tissue.

Separate team of researchers, reporting in the specialist monthly journal Nature Biotechnology, said they had found ways of efficiently coaxing these cells into developing into brain cells in lab mice.

The achievement was described by commentators as clearing an important hurdle on a long road towards developing treatments using embryonic stem cells.

Embryonic stem cells are cells that develop in the early stages after an egg is fertilised.

They have the ability to develop into almost any tissue, which opens up the possibility that they could be used as a graft to replace failing organs.

Royal baby girl is born

AFP, Tokyo

Crown Princess Masako gave birth to a baby girl Saturday after eight years of childless marriage to the heir to Japan's throne, and both mother and child were fine, officials said.

Although some Japanese had hoped for a boy to extend the succession to the world's oldest monarchy, the news was ecstatically greeted in a nation long starved of good news.

"Today at 2:43 pm (0543 GMT) at the Imperial Hospital, the princess gave birth to a princess. Both mother and baby are healthy," said Hirofumi Oka, head of the general affairs division of the Imperial Household Agency.

"Both the Emperor (Akihito) and the Empress (Michiko) were informed about the birth. The Emperor said he was really happy to hear the news and thanked those who were involved in the birth," Oka told a news conference.



Crown Princess Masako

"The Empress was in tears. She sent her congratulations to the couple," the official said, adding that both the royal grandparents were "sincerely relieved and looked very happy."

Masako, 37, was admitted to the hospital in the grounds of the

Imperial Palace around 11:25 pm Friday and was reported to have gone into labour around 12:40 pm Saturday.

The baby girl is Masako's first child after eight years of marriage to Crown Prince Naruhito, 41.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi issued a statement offering congratulations.

"Together with the people of Japan, I heartily celebrate the birth of a new princess," he said.

"I can well imagine how happy Crown Prince Naruhito and Princess Masako, as well as the Emperor and the Empress, are about the new baby."

The mood around the country was ecstatic.

"Oh, congratulations!" exclaimed a delighted Machiko Rikitake, 38 on hearing the news in Kumamoto in southwest Japan.

"I've been thrilled since she was hospitalised last night," the cinema worker told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

AIDS awareness activists 'beat' another activist dressed as a demon symbolising the AIDS epidemic during an AIDS awareness procession in Kolkata on Saturday on the occasion of World AIDS Day. More than ten thousand sex workers from Kolkata's brothels took part in the procession.

AIDS horror haunts Asia

AFP, Hong Kong

Thousands marched Saturday for the millions of Asians facing a slow death by AIDS, as the region finally showed signs of taking the pandemic seriously.

World AIDS Day Saturday was marked by official and unofficial events across the region with governments and activists alike pushing the message, still apparently unheeded by many Asians, that unprotected sex and needle-sharing can kill.

The activities came as a UN report released this week showed HIV or AIDS cases in Asia and the

Pacific had reached 7.1 million, with a staggering 1.07 million adults and children being newly infected with HIV in 2001.

But experts warned Asian governments were still not doing enough to stop the spread of AIDS.

"In large parts of Asia and the Pacific, prevention programmes are poorly funded and resourced," the report said.

"Because many high risk practices are frowned upon and even criminalised, there are serious political hurdles to prevention."

China was to broadcast its first televised AIDS awareness programme Saturday in a bid to halt

the country's astonishing rise in cases. Estimates put Chinese HIV/AIDS cases at anything up to 1.5 million and Shanghai has recorded a 45 per cent jump this year, according to local media.

Central China has also been beset by a horrific debacle in which tens of thousands of paid blood donors were infected by illegal blood banks. Whole villages are now wasting away in a case which provoked an international outcry.

Chinese sufferers however received a boost Saturday with the announcement that the prices of two crucial anti-AIDS drugs are to be cut to two-thirds.

Glowing tributes to George Harrison

AFP, London

Former Beatle George Harrison, the singer, songwriter, guitarist and mystic who helped shape the course of musical history, has died after losing a long battle against cancer.

Tributes poured in Friday from around the world for the gentle member of the "Fab Four" who died Thursday at the age of 58 in a friend's house in Los Angeles, his wife Olivia and son Dhani by his side.

"He left this world as he lived in it, conscious of God, fearless of death, and at peace, surrounded by family and friends," his family said.

Fellow Beatles Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr, the final two surviving Beatles, led the tributes.

Others flooded in from Liverpool, the birthplace of the Beatles, where city officials flew the British flag at half mast, and around the world,

including Queen Elizabeth and Prime Minister Tony Blair.

McCartney, clearly emotional as he spoke to reporters, called Harrison "my baby brother."

"We know he has been ill for a while and we have just been praying for some kind of miracle," he said.

"It wasn't to be, but I understand from his wife he went peacefully, which is a great blessing, and it was a very peaceful golden moment apparently."

Starr, the band's drummer, said he had lost "a best friend."

"We'll miss George for his sense of love, his sense of music and his sense of laughter," he said.

Harrison started his fight against cancer three years ago after he was diagnosed with throat cancer, but was later given the all-clear. He had been undergoing more treatment since a brain tumour operation earlier this month.

Nepali troops closing in on Maoist strongholds

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese security forces are advancing towards Maoist strongholds after two more rebels were killed in a government offensive, officials said Saturday.

A highly placed home ministry source said army personnel had advanced by land and air in far northwestern districts where the ultra-leftists have hideouts and training camps.

The source said four "top Maoist leaders," whose names were not revealed, were surrounded by security personnel near the rebels' stronghold of Rolpa, some 390 kilometres (240 miles) northwest of the capital Kathmandu.

With heavy snowfall in the Himalayas, officials said it was unlikely the Maoist leaders could slip into nearby Tibet. Both of Nepal's neighbours, China and India, have backed the government's crackdown, giving the rebels few safe places to flee.

ULFA to talk peace with Delhi if held under UN

AFP, Guwahati

A separatist group in India's north-eastern state of Assam said yesterday it would only negotiate with new Delhi if talks are held under UN auspices and "revolve" around sovereignty.

The outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which Tuesday offered to start talks to end two decades of insurgency, also said the negotiations must be held abroad.

"We are prepared to hold talks with the government if such negotiations are held outside India and under the supervision of the United Nations with the discussion revolving around the issue of sovereignty," ULFA publicity chief Mithingia Daimary said in a statement.

"We are fully committed, sincere and ready to sit for talks with the government if our conditions are met."

Indian authorities have earlier said the government was ready to hold talks with the ULFA leadership outside the country but rejected the other two demands.

ULFA chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa had on Tuesday announced the outfit was ready to hold talks with Indian authorities without preconditions.

Omar, Laden go on their own

AFP, Islamabad

They were comrades in arms, enigmatic figures who incarnated the threat of global terrorism. But with the world now closing in, Osama bin Laden and Mullah Mohammad Omar appear to be going their own ways.

Nobody can say for certain where the two men are hiding as they try to elude pursuing US-led forces. But the suspected terrorist mastermind and his Taliban protector clearly have different fugitive styles.

Omar, the reclusive supreme leader of the Islamic militia, claims to be standing firm in their southern spiritual stronghold of Kandahar, rallying his scattered troops and vowing a fight to the death.

Bin Laden has kept a low profile, making public remarks only twice since the September 11 attacks on the United States, once in a tape distributed for broadcast and once in an interview with a Pakistani journalist.

A one-time honoured "guest" and

major financial backer of the Taliban, the Saudi millionaire turned militant appears to be on his own as he flees US wrath for the carnage wrought in New York and Washington.

After a series of confusing statements, the Taliban now say with some consistency that they have no idea where bin Laden is. Moreover, they say he has dropped out of contact.

"There is no relation now. There is no communication," Omar's spokesman Syed Tayyab Agha told foreign journalists at a press conference 10 days ago in the Afghan border town of Spin Boldak.

The diverging paths of the two men have not been lost on the Americans who see the disintegration

of the Taliban regime as key to pinning down bin Laden and his Al-Qaida network.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on Friday called Omar a "dead-ender" who "is determined to try to re-energise Taliban, to get the Taliban fighters to consolidate somewhere and to kill people."

He said the austere Sunni cleric and his fundamentalist troops were trying to either hang on to Kandahar or, if they can't do that, to "get in the mountains and wait their time and come back."

Iraq on collision course with global powers

AFP, Dubai

President Saddam Hussein and his entrenched regime are set on a new head-on collision course with the United Nations and with the US super-power over sanctions and arms inspections.

Baghdad, on notice from President George W. Bush, freely admits it expects to be the target of US air strikes, maybe even before the Afghan question is fully settled.

The tone of total resistance from Iraq has been ratcheted up once again to meet the growing menace in Bush's Texan one-liners on Iraq.

"We are not scared of those threats," Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz told reporters Saturday.

"This leadership is going to stay ... against all the odds, against all the threats from outside," he added defiantly.

The renewal in New York on Thursday of the UN's oil-for-food programme for six more months has opened the way to transform the 11-year-old embargo into "smart" sanctions aimed at cracking down on Baghdad's military arsenal.

Maoists kill local politician, blow up court in Andhra

AFP, Hyderabad

Maoist rebels killed a local political leader and blew up a court in India's southern state of Andhra Pradesh in a series of attacks in the past three days, police said Saturday.

A group of the rebels Friday broke into the house of the local leader of India's main opposition Congress Party, Venkat Reddy, in the town of Bejuggama and shot him dead.

Early Saturday, the rebels destroyed a court house in Asifabad, 350 km north of Hyderabad, with dynamite.

Authorities put the police on high alert and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was due to visit the state Sunday.

In other attacks over the past days, the rebels blew up three industrial units, including a milk chilling plant partly owned by the family of the chief minister of the state, Chandra Babu Naidu.

PA candidate defects ahead of Lankan polls

AFP, Colombo

A Sri Lankan ruling party candidate at next week's parliamentary elections has defected, becoming the first contestant to cross over, the main opposition said Saturday.

Governing People's Alliance (PA) member Cleatus Mendis in a letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunga said he could not remain in the party in the face of electoral malpractice and violence.

A copy of Mendis' resignation as a member of the PA and his withdrawal as a candidate from the December 5 parliamentary elections was released to reporters by the main opposition United National Party (UNP).

Opposition spokesman Ravi Karunanayake said that Mendis fled the country Saturday when his vehicle was attacked shortly after he sent his resignation letter to the president.

Next week's election is being held five years ahead of schedule after Kumaratunga sacked the legislature to avoid the collapse of her Marxist-backed minority government.