

UN presents draft accord as inter-Afghan talks go on

AFP, Bonn

UN officials presented rival Afghan groups meeting in Germany with a draft agreement on an interim government late Saturday, as US warplanes pounded the Taliban's last stronghold, Kandahar.

The UN had asked the four Afghan delegations at the talks to provide a final list of nominees for the interim authority either overnight Saturday or early Sunday, said Ahmad Fawzi, the spokesman of UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi.

He refused to give any details on the content of the eight-page blueprint. A delegation member said earlier that a 24-member body had been proposed, composed of eight members from the powerful Northern Alliance, eight from the camp of the ex-king Mohammed Zahir Shah, two each from the two other groups at the talks and four independent figures.

Landmark talks between rival Afghan groups on a post-Taliban government were hauled out of deadlock Saturday when the UN was forced to slim down its ambitions for a complex power-sharing deal.

Seeking to overcome deep divisions within the powerful Northern Alliance over the composition of the proposed two-tier authority, Brahimi instead moved to broker a small provisional cabinet.

The radical revision of the UN's blueprint meant the rollercoaster talks in Bonn were again pushed into extra time.

"The earliest I will have something to say is tomorrow morning, if we have a deal," Fawzi said. But he warned: "It could all break down again."

The nail-biting talks stalled in their fifth day when the Alliance's old-guard

president, Burhanuddin Rabbani, refused to approve a final list of nominees for the 120-seat parliament-style supreme council.

After his chief delegate Yunus Qanooni dropped a political bombshell by threatening to ignore his nominal leader back in Kabul, Rabbani instead proposed the talks narrow down to deciding on a cabinet line-up of 12-25 people.

He said the interim cabinet should be shaped up of specialists and technicians, and administer the country for four months.

But as Rabbani appeared determined to guard his position, his days as Afghanistan's UN-recognised president appeared to be numbered.

Diplomats monitoring the power-sharing talks in Germany said neither Rabbani nor Afghanistan's former king Mohammed Zahir Shah -- who has the second most powerful delegation at the negotiations -- were likely to head a new interim government if one could be agreed.

The Northern Alliance foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah -- who along with Qanooni forms the core of the grouping's more dynamic generation -- also said in Kabul that Rabbani would not be taking the helm in the interim set up.

"It is evident that neither the (former) king nor Rabbani will be head of the cabinet," added a western diplomat who asked not to be identified.

A European Union source close to the talks said the 87-year-old ex-king, who has lived in exile in Rome since 1973, was not considered a "practical option" to lead a small interim cabinet, while Rabbani was "not seen as a unifying figure."

Nepal vows to crush Maoists in 3 months

AFP, Kathmandu

A top Nepalese defence official vowed Sunday that security forces will crush a Maoist insurgency within three months "at any cost" and reported heavy rebel casualties in a continued land and air assault by the government.

Defence Secretary Padam Kumar Acharya said the army and police continued attacks by land and air at the weekend on Maoist strongholds and hideouts and that "many of the rebels are believed killed in the operation."

He said, however, that security forces did not have an estimate on how many Maoists died in the assaults.

He said security forces wanted to crush the Maoists before the parliament meets to decide whether to renew a three-month state of emergency and tough anti-terrorism ordinance declared by King

Gyanendra on November 26.

Defence sources said security forces were focusing action in the northwest of the country, where in some districts the rebels run a virtual parallel state with their own schools and judiciary.

The army has worked to surround groups of Maoists and trap them, defence sources said.

"Army security personnel has drawn an offensive strategy of searching and cornering the Maoist terrorists," a source said.

Nepal's home ministry has said that an unspecified number of Maoists, including some elected to the rebels' local councils, have defected to the government's side.

The Maoists broke a four-month ceasefire on November 24 by launching a string of attacks on the army and police. Officials have said some 430 people, most of them rebels, have since been killed.



Israeli rescuers give first aid to injured people in downtown Jerusalem (L) after an suicide bomb attacks on Saturday that left 12 people dead and scores of others injured. An Israeli woman wails following the death of a kin in one of the suicide attacks against Israelis (R).

PA pledges to track down Jerusalem attackers

AFP, Gaza City

The Palestinian leadership condemned a deadly double suicide bomb blast and car bomb explosion in west Jerusalem late Saturday, and pledged to assume "all its commitments and responsibilities" to find those responsible, in a statement received here by AFP Sunday.

"The Palestinian leadership will assume all its commitments and responsibilities to track down the people who carried out, and those who are responsible for, this attack," it said.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat for his part said on CNN television that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat condemned the attacks which left at least eight people dead, including two suicide bombers, and more than 150 injured, according to Israeli police.

Erakat said that following the blasts Arafat had spoken to US

Secretary of State Colin Powell and his special envoy Anthony Zinni, who is currently in the region on a peacemaking mission.

Israeli foreign ministry spokesman Emmanuel Nachshon said earlier that Arafat was "clearly and without any doubt" to blame, "due to his total lack of action in the domain of fighting terror."

However, the Palestinian leadership, which includes the Palestinian cabinet and the executive of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), said "those who committed and those who planned this attack want to ruin the American and international peace efforts in the Middle East."

"These operations are an open challenge to the decisions (of the leadership), the PLO, and the central committee of Fatah" which is Arafat's political faction, the statement said.

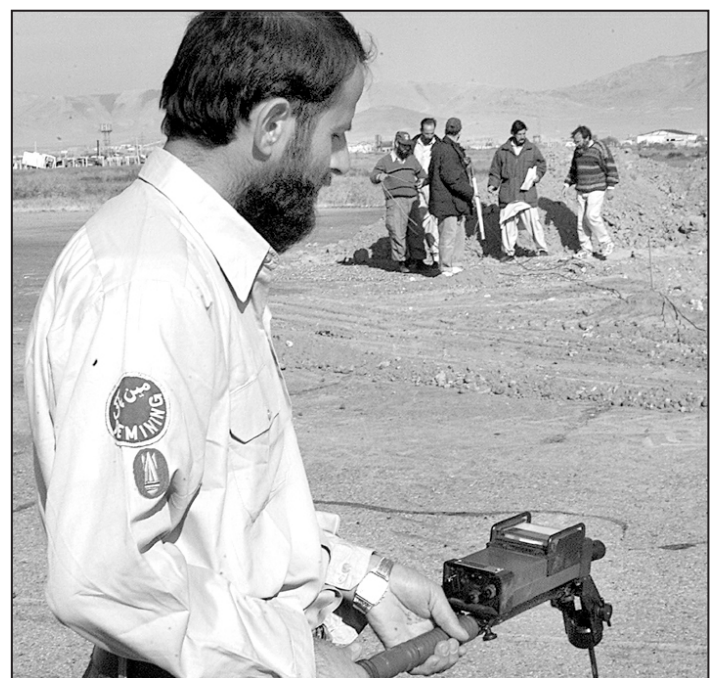
The leadership also expressed

its condolences to Israel and "the Israeli people and the relatives of the victims and the people who were wounded."

Moreover, US peace envoy Anthony Zinni early Sunday said he had told Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat he must arrest those behind the "vicious and evil terrorist attacks" which killed 12 people in west Jerusalem, including the two suicide bombers, and injured 170 others.

"I condemn in the strongest possible terms the vicious and evil terrorist attacks in Jerusalem tonight," he said in a statement released by the US embassy.

"I spoke with Chairman Arafat tonight and made absolutely clear that those responsible for planning and carrying out these attacks must be found and brought to justice," said the retired Marine Corps general.



An Afghan mine specialist holds a bomb detector as he searches for an unexploded US bomb buried at the runway in Kabul Airport on Sunday. There is another unexploded bomb to be cleared from the airport, which is unlikely to reopen for another six weeks.

Silence, sensitivity about Pak N-safety

AFP, Islamabad

If Pakistani officials insist loudly their nuclear secrets are safe from terrorists, they talk in whispers about two of their top nuclear scientists who have been detained for weeks.

Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood and Abdul Majeed, who retired from the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) three years ago, are currently being held by military intelligence officials in an undisclosed location.

No formal charges have been filed against the pair, who have been held for the better part of five weeks. But officials said they were being investigated for possible links to terror suspect Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaida movement.

"They are detained to probe the extent of their involvement and links with the Taliban and Al-Qaida," said one official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The case has drawn considerable international attention, coming at a time when Pakistan is under intense scrutiny as a possible source of nuclear material and expertise for terrorists.

And it demonstrates the sensitivity of the military regime in Islamabad to an issue that has become a priority for its new-found ally and potential

benefactor, the United States.

Pakistan entered the nuclear club in May 1998 with a series of underground tests. It was reported to have possessed at the end of 1999 enough plutonium and highly enriched uranium for up to 50 nuclear warheads.

Islamabad has reacted with increasing annoyance to repeated questions being raised over how secure those nuclear assets are.

"There is an excellent command and control system in place that we have evolved and there is no question of their falling into the hands of any fundamentalist," said President Pervez Musharraf.

With nerves on edge following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, Pakistani officials are keeping a tight lid on the case of the two scientists.

In public, they are playing down its importance, arguing that Mahmood and Majeed had no access to Pakistan's nuclear weapons program and were being investigated only for violating unspecified rules for retired scientists.

But during his long career with PAEC, where he rose to become one of the key directors, Mahmood was associated with the secret and tightly guarded nuclear programme.

Campaign for Lankan polls ends

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka stepped up security for final election rallies Sunday, wrapping up five weeks of campaigning that have left at least 16 people dead and hundreds wounded, officials said.

Thousands of police were deployed to provide protection at the rallies of the two main political parties -- the ruling People's Alliance (PA) and the opposition United National Party (UNP) -- amid fears of Tamil rebel attacks.

A police spokesman said two more opposition activists were shot dead in the north-western province Sunday raising to 16 the number of

people killed in campaign-related incidents.

Police said extraordinary security measures were taken to prevent members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) infiltrating the crowds at rallies to carry out suicide bombings.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who narrowly escaped assassination while addressing a meeting in December 1999, was to attend a similar gathering at her home constituency of Yakkalamulla, outside the capital.

Security was equally tight at the opposition campaign rally where party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe

was due to speak.

Wickremesinghe has accused the army of training Tamil men to bomb the green-coloured bus he uses on the campaign trail. The army has denied the allegations.

The defence ministry, however, said that it feared a large number of army deserters were involved in criminal activity during the campaign and announced a stepped-up drive to arrest them.

Nearly 170 deserters were arrested in the past 48 hours, the defence ministry said Sunday, adding that more searches will be conducted to detain deserters, estimated to number some 30,000 out of the 125,000-strong army.

UK troops hours away from capturing Laden

AFP, London

A hand-picked group of British special forces operatives stormed one of suspected terror chief Osama bin Laden's mountain strongholds missing him by just two hours, a British Sunday paper reported.

Four soldiers from the elite Special Air Service (SAS) were wounded in a fierce battle in the caves of the Hada mountains, southeast of the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar, The Mail on Sunday said.

It was the largest deployment of SAS troops in one battle since the war in Oman in the mid 1970s, the paper added.

"We were within a whisker of getting him. It was a hard battle and will have put the EF of God into his people," said a source close to the regiment, quoted by the paper.

"When prisoners were ques-

tioned it came out we had just missed him by about two hours," the source added.

Intelligence sources, also contacted by the paper, believe that bin Laden fled as the battle began.

"The enemy were facing highly trained and disciplined troops who, although outnumbered, had the tenacity, professionalism and firepower to terrorise them. Bin Laden knows the SAS are not far behind," one said.

The paper said that as soon as the decision was made to deploy coalition troops, the SAS was told its priority was to find bin Laden and Mullar Omar, the leader of the Taliban.

"There comes a time when all the missiles and Stealth bombers have done their bit and you have to get to grips with the enemy and kill him," said an SAS source.

Taiwan's DPP seeks alliance to form govt

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) on Sunday began the search for coalition partners following its general election success in robbing the once-mighty Kuomintang (KMT) of its final grip on power.

The DPP, which already holds the presidency through Chen Shui-bian, is desperate to gain control of the legislature and put an end to the inter-party squabbling which has blighted Chen's first 19 months in office.

After Saturday's election brought the DPP 87 seats in the new 225-member parliament against just 68 for the KMT, President Chen said there should be a "commencement of cooperation between the ruling and opposition parties."

Chen has expounded plans for a

grand-sounding "national stability alliance" of 120 deputies, uniting to resolve serious problems facing Taiwan, including an ailing economy and stalled relations with mainland China.

Analysts expect a series of KMT deputies will be approached with a view to joining the alliance, which if they agree, will put a seal on the party's miserable fall from grace.

The KMT, or Nationalists, which once governed all China under Chiang Kai-shek, ruled modern Taiwan for 51 straight years until Chen's presidential election win last year.

Now parliament, the KMT's last hold on any meaningful power, has slipped from its grasp as well, leading to widespread speculation about the future of KMT chairman Lien Chan.



Four newly elected ruling Democratic Progressive Parties' legislators waves to supporters on the street in Taipei on Sunday. The DPP won 87 seats in the 225-member parliament, with 13 going to Taiwan Solidarity Union pro-independence ally. The KMT won 68 and the PFP 46.

'Arab Taliban fighting to death in S Afghanistan'

REUTERS, Quetta

Ethnic Pashtun fighters attacked the airport near the Taliban's last stronghold of Kandahar overnight meeting strong resistance from hundreds of predominantly Arab fighters, a tribal spokesman said.

"The Arabs are really fighting, they know they have no choice, they are fighting to the death," Khalid Pashtoon, a spokesman for former Mujahideen Kandahar governor Gul Agha Sherzai, told Reuters by satellite phone.

The clashes came as US forces reinforced their desert forward base outside Kandahar and a local official in the eastern city of Jalalabad said 20 civilians were killed and 18 wounded in overnight US air strikes nearby.

The official, who asked not to be named, said US planes had bombed the Agam district about 38 km south of Jalalabad, near where Washington believes fugitive

militant Osama bin Laden may be hiding.

The Afghan Islamic Press news agency said 13 civilians had been killed and many wounded in separate US raids south of Kandahar airport.

A detachment of helicopters from the 26th Marine expeditionary unit, including Cobra attack helicopters, joined the aircraft already at the desert airstrip near Kandahar on Sunday, a military official said.

Another official said British, German and Australian liaison officers were at the base coordinating with coalition forces in Afghanistan.

The extra air and ground assets, including light armoured vehicles, have allowed the Marines to extend the range of their reconnaissance patrols from the airstrip, which is within striking distance of Kandahar.

The United States launched its strikes on Afghanistan in its bid to flush out bin Laden, its prime suspect in the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, and punish his Taliban protectors.

Indian close to developing HIV vaccine

AFP, New Delhi

A top Indian medical institute is close to a breakthrough in developing a vaccine against one of the most common strains of HIV, the Hindustan Times newspaper reported on Sunday.

It said Pradeep Seth, head of microbiology in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, was developing a vaccine for HIV Type 1, which is one of the most common virus that causes the AIDS infection.

Seth started his experiments three years ago, but realised he was on the right track following his experiments with mice.

'US anti-terror war incites West-Islam confrontation'

AFP, Riyadh

The US-led war on terrorism has seen western states discriminate against Arabs and Muslims, and led to a confrontation between the West and Islam, a Saudi paper blasted Sunday.

"Let's admit that there is a confrontation now between the West and the Islamic world," the semi-official Al-Riyadh daily said in an editorial.

"Amending the laws under the pretext of fighting terrorism while in fact targeting Arabs and Muslims, cannot be changed by organising (Ramadan) iftar meals or visiting Islamic centres," the paper said.

Al-Riyadh said the campaign

against terror has replaced "freedom of religion, human rights and equal citizenship rights by giving police and security men the power to imprison and question any Arab or Muslim for the least suspicion including their colour, language or even going to the mosque."

The paper said the world's three monotheistic religions were not "born in London or Washington" and that Jesus Christ was "not blond with blue eyes" as depicted in the West, because he was born in Palestine.

"The campaign against Islam is part of a hidden struggle that exploded as a result of events in America," a reference to the

September 11 terror attacks in New York and Washington.

It said that western governments were applying a "double standard" policy in this respect.

"The double standard policy of western governments is very unfortunate, as their attempt to assure Islamic world by statements is contradicted by deeds on the ground and changes in legislation ... specifically against Arabs and Muslims," the paper said.

Separately, the executive director of the American Islamic Relations Council Nehad Awadh said abuses on Arabs and Muslims in the United States have multiplied after the September 11 attacks.

15 Kashmir militants killed

AFP, Srinagar

Fifteen Muslim militants and an Indian army major were killed in separatist-linked violence overnight in Indian-administered Kashmir, a police spokesman said Sunday.

Twenty-one houses, a primary school and more than two dozen one-room tenements were also destroyed in a fire set off by one of the gunbattles.

The encounters erupted during cordon-and-search operations by the Indian army in the northern Kashmir district of Kupwara, which borders Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

The police spokesman said six militants, all local Kashmiris affiliated with leading militant group Hizbul Mujahedin, were shot dead during a three-hour encounter at the village of Magam.

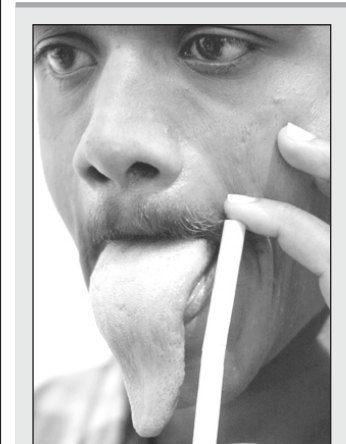
18 killed in plane crash in Russia

AFP, Moscow

A Russian border guard Il-76 plane crashed Sunday during a flight from Moscow to Russia's far eastern city of Pateropavlovsk-Kamchatsk, killing all 18 people on board, officials said.

The plane's pilot radioed to ground control that a fire had erupted on board while the plane was cruising at an altitude of 9,600 meters (31,700 feet), an emergency ministry official told NTV television.

Contact was lost moments later and the plane disappeared from the radar when it was 7,500 meters above the ground.



Mohan Kumar, 22, stretches out his tongue as a friend holds a cigarette next to it, in Bangalore on Sunday. Kumar, an electrician by profession, claims to have a tongue measuring 3.2 inches (8.13 cm) in length. Kumar plans to apply for an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records in the "longest tongue" category as the current record holder is Annika Irmel of Germany with a tongue measuring 2.75 inches.

N Korea to allow foreign inspection of N-lab

AFP, Seoul

North Korea is ready to permit foreign inspections of its nuclear laboratory despite threats to revive its suspected nuclear program, a report said Sunday.

The North's isotope production laboratory in its Yongbyon nuclear complex will be open to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Yonhap news agency said.

It quoted a South Korean government source as saying: "The North offered to open its laboratory to inspection at talks with IAEA officials in early November."

The laboratory has not been the target of inspections demanded by a 1994 accord under which the North froze its suspected nuclear program in exchange for nuclear reactors producing less weapons-grade plutonium.

Swiss voters cast ballots for dumping army

AFP, Bern

The Swiss were going to the polls on Sunday to vote on a proposal to abolish the army, a motion that is opposed by the government and parliament and was turned down in a similar vote 12 years ago.

Supporters of the referendum argue that Switzerland does not need its army as it currently does not face any military threat and that shelving the army would not make the country a less safe place to be.

They also say it costs about nine billion Swiss francs (5.6 billion dollars, 6.4 billion euros) a year to maintain and that the resources could be better spent on non-military initiatives both at home and abroad.