

3,000 Taliban detained in Afghan prison: ICRC

AFP, KABUL

More than 3,000 Taliban fighters captured during fighting around Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz are being held in a northern Afghanistan prison, an International Committee of the Red Cross official said Monday.

Mazar-i-Sharif fell to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance on November 9, triggering a rout of the Islamic militia in the north capped by their surrender of Kunduz on November 26 after a two-week siege.

While no figure was ever given for the number of Taliban surrendering or captured at Mazar-i-Sharif, Northern Alliance officials said some 5,000 Afghan militiamen and 750 foreigners had given up at Kunduz.

The pro-Taliban foreigners were taken to a prison fortress outside Mazar-i-Sharif and some 450 were killed during a three-day rebellion suppressed by alliance forces and US warplanes, alliance



PHOTO: AFP

An Afghan family walks through a cemetery of the Afghan capital on Monday. Estimates put the death toll of more than 20 years of war in Afghanistan at 1.5 million to 2 million. For the first time in recent years Afghan warring factions are drawing close to an agreement to map a peaceful way out of conflicts in ongoing historic UN-sponsored talks in Bonn, Germany.

Taliban face final push after US ultimatum

AFP, Kabul

Heavy fighting flared for a second day Monday close to the Taliban's southern bastion of Kandahar as tribal forces backed by intense US air raids tried to storm the airport, sources said.

Afghanistan's diehard Taliban fighters were on notice to surrender or die as the Americans and their Afghan allies geared to flush the hardline Islamic militia out of the last major city under their control.

Tribal militias loyal to two Pashtun elders fought to within a kilometre of the airport, some 20 kilometres (12 miles) to the south of the city centre, as US aircraft harried the most stubborn Taliban resistance.

"Because of the US bombardment, they (the Taliban) cannot come close to our people," said Ahmad Karzai, brother of former deputy foreign minister Hamid Karzai who is leading one tribal group outside Kandahar.

The anti-Taliban forces had crossed a key bridge three kilometres (two miles) from their objective and expected to take the airport later Monday, he said.

"Kandahar airport is very important. From there, we can move to other districts and take up more positions," he said.

A Marine spokesman said the battle appeared to be building to a "culmination" as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld signalled a potentially dangerous role for US forces based in the desert south of Kandahar.

He said the Taliban, outnumbering their local foes and stiffened by hard-nosed Pakistani, Arab, Chechen and Chinese fighters, were expected to put up a fight in their spiritual and ethnic capital.

"It will take some reinforcements, it will take some assistance from the air," Rumsfeld said on US television Sunday.

He did not comment on the possibility of US ground troops taking part in combat but said the conflict was entering a dangerous phase and suggested that American troops could be killed or captured.

"The noose is tightening but the remaining task is a particularly dirty and unpleasant one," Rumsfeld said.

"If they don't surrender, they will be killed."

US officials said there were 1,500-2,000 American troops in Afghanistan, including more than 1,000 Marines at a desert airstrip around southwest of Kandahar.

Extra Cobra helicopter gunships, armed with lethal rockets, guided missiles and 20 millimetre cannons, arrived Sunday, nearly doubling the number of attack and support choppers on hand. More light armored vehicles were flown in.

Major James Higgins, a Marine intelligence officer, said the Taliban were still in control of Kandahar but the battle "seems to be reaching a culmination point of some type."

"You have a lot of forces at play -- opposition groups coming from the north down, from the southeast up, and us coming potentially from where we are," he said.

Anti-Taliban forces of the former governor of Kandahar province Gul Agha, the second Pashtun tribal leader advancing towards the airport, claimed Sunday to have killed 12 Arab fighters during fierce combat.

Rebels blow up minister's home in Andhra

REUTERS, Bhubaneswar

Maoist rebels used explosives to blow up the home of a regional minister in a remote village in eastern India, police said yesterday.

The minister was away at the time, and there were no casualties in the weekend incident, they added.

Police said insurgents of the People's War Group (PWG), mainly active in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, struck on Saturday night across the border in Orissa state at Poteru, 600 km south of the state capital, Bhubaneswar.

A senior police official told Reuters the Maoists struck at the house of Orissa's Cooperation Minister Arabinda Dhali, who was in Bhubaneswar at the time.

He said the guerrillas shouted "Long live PWG", and forced Dhali's relatives to leave the house before blowing it up. Later the guerrillas crossed a river and blew up a police post.



PHOTO: AFP

US singer Gwen Stefani of the group "No Doubt" poses with her award for "My Favorite Female" at "My VH1 Awards '01," at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles on Sunday. MTV hosts the awards while fans on the Internet choose the winners.

Prayer, protests mark Bhopal gas tragedy

AFP, Bhopal

Prayer meetings and mild protests on Monday marked the 17th anniversary of the world's deadliest industrial disaster -- a toxic gas leak in this central Indian town that killed thousands and has left many still suffering.

An angry group of people burnt an effigy of Warren Anderson, the then chairman of Union Carbide, which owned a pesticide factory from which a lethal leak in 1984 killed between 3,500 and 7,500 immediately and injured a further half a million people.

Union Carbide, now owned by US multinational Dow Chemicals, abandoned the factory after the disaster.

Karadzic, Mladic should surrender, says Bosnian PM

AFP, Sarajevo

Bosnian Serb Prime Minister Miladin Ivanic said Sunday that the UN war crime tribunal's two most wanted fugitives, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, should surrender themselves for trial.

"If I were either of these men, I'd put myself at the disposal of the Hague court, because when you believe in something you should defend it to the end," he told Bosnian television.

Karadzic, the political leader of the Serb-run part of Bosnia during the 1992-1995 war, and his war-time military chief, Mladic, are indicted for crimes against humanity and genocide.

100 Hamas militants detained

PA intensifies crack down on extremists

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian security forces have jailed more than 100 Islamic militants amid massive pressure on Yasser Arafat to crack down on extremists or run the risk of a huge military response from Israel, security officials said Monday.

Officials said at least 77 members of the radical militant groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which refuse any ceasefire with Israel, had been arrested in the West Bank alone since Sunday.

Another 35 had been jailed in the

Gaza Strip, they said. The detainees included several leaders and spokesmen, the officials added.

A Hamas official confirmed the arrests of two of its top political leaders, Ismail Abu Shanab and Ismail Haniya, and said police had issued arrest warrants for another two.

Haniya and Shanab are both leading political figures and spokesmen for Hamas in the Gaza Strip, although the latter is an intellectual considered close to the group's ailing spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin.

The swoop came after Arafat's

Palestinian leadership pledged to crack down after the anti-Israeli suicide and gun attacks which left 26 Israelis dead, according to a final toll.

These people were arrested because the two movements are not committed to the Palestinian Authority's decision for a ceasefire in the 14-month intifada, or uprising against Israeli occupation, the security source said.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Islamic resistance movement Hamas on Monday vehemently condemned the arrests of Islamists by the Palestinian Authority, saying that the

authority "was trying to become Israel's protector."

"It is clear that the Authority (of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat) has given in to Israeli and American pressures in taking repressive and illegal measures against members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad," the vice president of the Hamas political bureau, Mousa Abu Marzuk, said when questioned by AFP in Damascus.

"The Palestinian Authority is trying to become Israel's protector", he added.

US forces near Laden lair

AFP, Islamabad

US special forces have helicoptered into eastern Afghanistan where US warplanes bombed an elaborate cave complex thought to be a hide-out for terror suspect Osama bin Laden, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) said Monday.

The AIP said about 20 American commandos landed in Jalalabad early Sunday to launch a search in the Tora Bora caves for the man accused of masterminding the September 11 terror attacks on the United States.

Quoting unidentified "informed

sources", the Pakistan-based agency said the special forces troops landed in two helicopters and were expected to discuss attack plans with officials of Nangarhar province.

Bin Laden has long been believed to have a heavily defended lair in the caves of Tora Bora around 50 kilometres (30 miles) south of Jalalabad.

US warplanes kept up their airstrikes around the cave complex Sunday night and Monday and killed 58 civilians, the AIP reported, quoting Hazrat Ali, police chief of Nangarhar province.

Tora Bora is situated in the savage and freezing White Mountains and is reachable only by foot or on horseback.

The fortress comprises a complex network of 30 to 40 caves, many connected by tunnels. One Afghan who visited Tora Bora said it contained numerous rooms with immense walls and electric heating.

Locals say the Mujahedin fighting against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s worked hard to fortify and expand the Tora Bora complex, digging new tunnels and burying large caches of arms.

Russia opposes possible US attacks on Iraq

AP, Cairo

Russia opposes possible US military strikes against Iraq, believing diplomacy was the only way to solving the arms inspections impasse between Washington and Baghdad, a Russian envoy visiting the Middle East said on Sunday.

Nikolai Kartuzov said Moscow, a key ally and major trading partner with Baghdad, would condemn any US attack on Iraq and was exerting great effort to prevent such an event. He did elaborate.

Kartuzov, who spoke to reporters after meeting Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa in Cairo, said targeting Iraq will have serious repercussions in the Middle East.

Speculation that America might attack Iraq has intensified following Baghdad's continued reluctance to

let UN inspectors determine if Iraq's programmes to build weapons of mass destruction have been dismantled.

On November 26, US President George W. Bush called on Baghdad to comply or face the consequences, a veiled threat that Iraq could be next on America's hit list once Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network and the Taliban militia is routed from Afghanistan.

Kartuzov, who visited Iraq last week, said a diplomatic solution was the only viable means to deal with the weapons inspection issue.

He said Washington had not provided any justification for launching an attack on Iraq nor produced evidence implicating it in the September 11 terror attacks on Washington and New York.

The United States has alleged that an Iraqi diplomat met bin Laden

in Afghanistan in 1998.

Kartuzov reiterated Russian calls for the lifting of UN economic sanctions imposed on Iraq as punishment for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Under UN Security Council resolutions, the sanctions cannot be lifted until UN inspectors certify that Iraq has dismantled its weapons programmes. Baghdad has barred inspectors from Iraq since they left the country ahead of US-British airstrikes in December 1998.

On Friday, a US-Russian compromise enabled the Security Council to approve a six-month extension of the UN humanitarian programme in Iraq. The programme lets Iraq sell unlimited quantities of oil on condition that proceeds are spent on food, medicine and other humanitarian goods, and war reparations.

Rabbani seeks control of Afghanistan for 6 months

AFP, Washington

The leader of the Northern Alliance has proposed an interim government that would keep him and his coalition in control of the country for as long as six more months, the Washington Post reported Monday.

Burhanuddin Rabbani, the alliance's nominal leader who is still recognized by the United Nations as Afghanistan's president, floated the idea, which he had not presented to delegates, in an interview with the daily.

"Primarily, we'll have an investigation about the people from al Qaeda because our people must know about this, why they came to Afghanistan to kill our people," Rabbani said in an interview.

"Then we will discuss it with the Americans. We have a cooperation with America, but it's a matter for the future. First we'll have an investigation. Then we'll discuss it," said the 61-year-old theologian, who served as president from 1992 until his

ouster by the Taliban in 1996.

Rabbani told the Post that his plan would allay concerns of the Pashtun ethnic group -- Afghanistan's largest -- by giving a Pashtun leader a position equivalent to that of prime minister.

He expressed his opposition to a substantial role in the government by former king Zahir Shah, insisting that the king be treated as just another participant on the leadership council.

"He can participate, he can have a role here -- but as an Afghan, not an extraordinary role," Rabbani said.

Rabbani also said that if his troops captured accused terrorist Osama bin Laden, Taliban leader Mohammad Omar or top figures of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network, he would not turn them over to the United States until after Afghanistan conducted its own investigation.



PHOTO: AFP

Younis Qanooni, the leader of the Afghanistan delegation of the Northern Alliance at the UN-Afghanistan talks (L) talks to UN deputy special representative for Afghanistan Francesc Vendrell on the sixth day of UN-Afghanistan talks at the Petersberg in Koenigswinter near Bonn on Sunday. The United Nations goaded rival Afghan factions to finalise a post-Taliban government on Monday after two decades of war but said delegates must still pick names for an interim administration.

'Anti-terror coalition an illusion'

AFP, Islamabad

The US-led military coalition mustered for Afghanistan is fraught with ambiguity, with the Americans single-mindedly pursuing Osama bin Laden and their allies more concerned with peacekeeping and humanitarian operations.

"There is no military coalition against terrorism in Afghanistan, it is an illusion," said a Western diplomatic source in Islamabad.

The source claimed the deployment in Afghanistan had been characterised by "great disorder" and a "dangerous mixture" of anti-terrorist military operations and humanitarian work.

The day after the adoption on November 14 by the UN Security

Council of a resolution paving the way for the inter-Afghan talks currently underway in Bonn, UN spokesman in New York Fred Eckhard admitted the world body was in total ignorance of the coalition's elaborate military plans.

The US is dominating the Western forces in Afghanistan, with a deployment of between 1,500 to 2,000 troops, while Britain and France have sent smaller units.

It was revealed Sunday, meanwhile, that Australian and German military liaison officers were bunkered down with the US Marines at a desert airstrip near Kandahar, the Taliban's last stronghold.

In November, after Northern Alliance forces swept through northern Afghanistan and captured

the cities of Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz, US and British special forces were there to help put down a rebellion of pro-Taliban prisoners of war.

Little information has leaked out on this "dirty job" of the special forces and other intelligence agents, or on the real degree of cooperation between themselves and with the Northern Alliance.

Two weeks ago, a number of British newspapers said London had delayed the dispatch of 6,000 British soldiers to Afghanistan because, they claimed, the United States was more concerned with tracking terrorist suspect Osama bin Laden and his Taliban cohorts than the installation of a force charged with protecting humanitarian aid.

Nepal claims crippling Maoist rebels

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government said Monday it has made inroads into Maoist-controlled areas, crippling the rebels' ability to strike back, amid reports that the Maoist supremo has been surrounded.

"Police and army security personnel have effectively launched their anti-Maoist campaign, striking secret training camps and meeting places the Nepalese authorities never thought existed," a defence ministry official said.

The official said a relative decrease in the number of ambushes by Maoists in recent days was a sign of the government campaign's

success. Several Nepali-language newspapers said the army surrounded the Maoists' top leader, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, alias Prachanda, and his right-hand man Babu Ram Bhattarai in a rebel stronghold in northwestern Nepal.

No government officials would confirm the reports, citing state censorship on reporting details of the anti-Maoist campaign.

Home ministry officials have said that security forces have penetrated rebel-dominated parts of northwestern and northeastern Nepal with a strategy of seeking out the Maoists and cornering them.

Lankan towns tense after campaign rampage

3 presidential guards detained

AFP, Colombo

Curfews were lifted Monday in north-central Sri Lanka where army troops were ordered to reinforce police after rival political parties clashed overnight leaving two people dead, police said.

Police stepped up patrols after overnight arson attacks against opposition supporters in the Anuradhapura district, a local official said adding the area was tense ahead of Wednesday's parliamentary elections.

Campaigning ended in the region Sunday on a violent note when ruling party activists went on the rampage and attacked opposition supporters, leaving two people dead and 18 others wounded.

Police Deputy Inspector-General Gamini Nawaratne who heads the election violence monitoring unit here said the local police were ordered to seek help from army units to bring the situation under control.

He said the army was deployed to help police maintain law and order in the curfew-bound suburbs of Kekirawa, Kalawewa and Anuradhapura West overnight.

"The curfew was imposed because of the high-level of election-related violence" the region's top police officer, Ananda Jayasekara, said adding the curfew was eased at dawn Monday.

Police here said campaign-related violence in the past month had claimed the lives of 18 people while hundreds had been wounded. Nearly 2,000 complaints have been received by police.

The private centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) said at least 26 people were killed in violence which included attacks carried out by Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

Meanwhile, police have arrested three members of the elite Presidential Security Division for alleged involvement in election-related violence, local officials said yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan opposition party supporters cheer on Sunday at a rally attended by opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. Sri Lanka is due to go to the polls on Wednesday to elect a 225-member parliament.