

N Alliance to accept 1,000 peacekeepers in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

The Northern Alliance favours an international security force of 1,000 soldiers in Kabul that will limit itself to guarding the premises of the new interim government, a defence ministry spokesman told AFP Wednesday.

Incoming Defence Minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim, a senior alliance figure, delivered this message to the top UN envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, in talks in Kabul on Tuesday, said spokesman Bara Salih.

"General Fahim told Brahimi that in his view, 1,000 troops will be enough to guarantee security for the new government," he said.

The alliance, which has 4,000 security forces in Kabul, including many dressed in military fatigues armed with Kalashnikovs that appear to be from the regular army, has already demilitarised the city, the spokesman insisted.

Under last week's historic UN-brokered power-sharing accord in Bonn, the alliance pledged to withdraw all military units before the deployment of a UN-mandated international security force.

"We have no military units here, all of our military are outside Kabul. We just don't have enough police uniforms. That is why some of the security forces are dressed like soldiers," said Salih.

"We are respecting the Bonn agreement," he added.

Earlier this week, a top aide to General Fahim had said that some soldiers would stay on in the capital even after the deployment of the UN-mandated force.

And on Wednesday there were clear signs of a military presence.

Close to one of Fahim's offices in Kabul's Wazir Akbar Khan district, a jeep packed with men dressed in khaki and armed with hand-held rocket-propelled grenade launchers roared into the street.

A few streets away, an anti-aircraft gun mounted on the back of a military vehicle stood parked on the curb.

Under the Bonn accord, an interim six-month administration is to take power on December 22 headed by Pashtun royalist Hamid Karzai.

However, the three "power ministries," foreign, interior and defence, will be kept by the troika that runs the alliance, Abdullah Abdullah, Yunus Qanooni and General Fahim.

The Northern Alliance, a loose coalition of Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara ethnic minorities dislodged the hardline Taliban movement from power last month with the help of US air strikes.



PHOTO: AFP
An Afghan fighter loyal to Kandahar Governor Gul Agha inspects a crib, allegedly belonging to one of former Taliban leader Mullah Omar's children, in his devastated compound in Kandahar on Wednesday.

Probe on Sept 11 attack in US Frenchman indicted

AFP, Washington

A Frenchman on Tuesday became the first person indicted over the September 11 terror attacks, US Attorney General John Ashcroft announced.

Three months to the day after the attacks, Zacarias Moussaoui, 33, who is of Moroccan descent, was charged on six counts, ranging from conspiracy to commit terrorist acts, destroy aircraft and murder US employees, to conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction.

Four of the counts carry the death penalty.

Moussaoui, who has been in custody since August 16, "engaged in the same preparation and training for murder as the 19 co-conspirators who carried out the September 11 hijackings," the indictment alleges.

It also names as co-conspirators Osama bin Laden and other mem-

bers of his Al-Qaida organisation, along with Ayman al-Zawahri, the head of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and two men who allegedly sent funds to the terror suspects. None of them have been indicted.

"The indictment issued today is a chronicle of evil; a carefully documented, year-by-year, month-by-month, day-by-day account of a terrorist conspiracy that gathered both force and intensity in the weeks before September 11," Ashcroft said.

"Zacarias Moussaoui is alleged to have been an active participant in this conspiracy, alongside the 19 terrorists who carried it out."

The Justice Department said a preliminary court hearing for Moussaoui, born in Saint-Jean de Luz in southwestern France, had been scheduled for January 2 in Alexandria, Virginia, just outside Washington.

Lankan president, PM clash over cabinet job



PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lanka's Air Force Chief Jayalath Weerakkody (R) shakes hands with newly elected Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in Colombo on Wednesday before swearing in ceremony of the new cabinet.

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga clashed Wednesday with her arch rival, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, by refusing to grant a portfolio to a member of his new cabinet.

Wickremesinghe, whose United National Party (UNP) won parliamentary elections last week, had chosen his ministers for Wednesday's swearing-in ceremony.

But Kumaratunga refused to swear in S. B. Dissanayake, who defected from her People's Alliance party to the UNP earlier this year, as welfare minister.

Officials in the prime minister's office said they managed to overcome the deadlock temporarily by getting Dissanayake inducted as minister for agriculture.

Dissanayake's defection from Kumaratunga's government in October, together with around a dozen others, led to the collapse of her administration and forced her into calling the snap elections.

Kumaratunga argued that there was an investigation against Dissanayake at the welfare ministry, so she did not want to give him the

job, officials said.

The portfolio will now be taken by Wickremesinghe.

Kumaratunga, who was elected separately to a six-year term in 1999, had been keen to hold onto her defence and finance portfolios, but agreed on Wednesday to give them up.

It is the first time in seven years that Sri Lanka has had a president from one party and a parliament controlled by a rival.

Meanwhile, Tamil Tiger rebels staged major attacks against army troops and police in Sri Lanka Wednesday, killing at least 16 people on the eve of a new cabinet of ministers being sworn in, defence officials said.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam fighters fired 120 mm mortar bombs at the Pahala Toppur army base in the northeastern district of Trincomalee in a bid to overrun the camp, officials said.

Defence ministry spokesman Sanath Karunaratne said security forces beat back the pre-dawn rebel assault by killing at least six guerrillas. Three soldiers were also killed and 20 of them wounded.

US sees 'indications' of Laden in Tora Bora

AFP, Tora Bora

Al-Qaida fighters here were facing an ultimatum to surrender or die Wednesday, as US officials gave their strongest indication yet that top terror suspect Osama bin Laden was in the area.

Anti-Taliban commanders leading the assault on the Tora Bora cave complex in eastern Afghanistan said bin Laden's Al-Qaida fighters in the region had agreed to come down from the rugged mountains and surrender at 8:00 am (0330 GMT) on Wednesday.

There was no immediate indication whether they had done so.

The United States, however, expressed skepticism at the surrender claims and said US forces would press on with the assault on Al-Qaida amid fears bin Laden could escape with other leaders and fighters of the terrorist organisation.

"Is the surrender option legitimate or is Al-Qaida doing it just to

stage a break-out?" said a Pentagon official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

US intelligence services said there were indications bin Laden and members of his inner circle were in the Tora Bora region.

"There were some indications that bin Laden was in the area" when a 7.5-tonne (15,000-pound) "daisy cutter" bomb was dropped on a cave in eastern Afghanistan over the weekend, a government official told AFP late Tuesday.

The official said the anti-Taliban fighters in the Tora Bora region had been successful in confining Al-Qaida fighters to "an increasingly smaller region."

ABC News reported earlier Tuesday that the bomb blast had sparked a series of panicked radio and satellite calls among Al-Qaida members.

Those communications provided confirmation that the Saudi-born dissident and his entourage were still in the region, the network said.

Most of the leaders of Al-Qaida and the Taliban so far have managed to escape capture despite a chain of surrenders of cities across Afghanistan that ended last week with the fall of Kandahar, the Taliban's last stronghold.

Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar is believed to be in the country, but US officials believe almost all of the remaining top Taliban leaders have escaped to Pakistan, NBC News reported, quoting Pentagon sources.

Meanwhile, as many as 500 Taliban and Al-Qaida troops captured in the northern cities of Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz have bought safe passage into Iran, the network reported, citing informed sources.

Pakistani officials claimed to have sealed the Afghan border in the region to prevent the escape of bin Laden and his forces, whom US authorities blame for the carnage on September 11.

Chinese president in Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

Chinese President Jiang Zemin arrived here Wednesday for his first visit to military-ruled Myanmar, which relies on Chinese investment and arms.

Jiang, the first Chinese president to visit Myanmar since 1985, was given a red-carpet welcome and a 21-gun salute at Yangon International Airport as thousands of well-wishers cheered.

The Chinese president was greeted after landing around 1:00 pm (0500 GMT) by the Myanmar junta's top three leaders -- Senior General Than Shwe, General Maung Aye and Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt.

Australian fighting for Taliban captured

AFP, Sydney

An Australian fighting with the Taliban militia in Afghanistan has been captured by Northern Alliance troops, the Australian government said Wednesday.

The man, believed to be 26 and from Adelaide, was captured by Northern Alliance troops last weekend, but the exact circumstances of his capture and his identity have not been released by the Australian government.

He trained extensively with Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaida network, Attorney-General Daryl Williams said.

Canberra had been advised the man was in good health, but Williams would not reveal where he was being held and said his identity was not being released to protect his family.

German House to debate immigration

AFP, Berlin

Germany's parliament is to debate Thursday an immigration bill from Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's ruling centre-left coalition that seeks to open the door to thousands of foreign workers in order to meet a shortage of skilled labour.

It will be the first time since World War II that parliament will be considering an overall law on immigration, which is a hotly debated topic in Germany.

Opposition right-wing parties say the country hosts too many foreigners. The main opposition party the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) said Tuesday that it would oppose the government bill in its current form.

Afghan crisis holds hope for Kashmir: Yasin Malik

AFP, Srinagar

The end of the conflict in Afghanistan will focus global attention on Kashmir, a top separatist leader said Wednesday, calling on India and Pakistan to seek a permanent resolution to their dispute over the Himalayan region.

"While the dust is settling in Afghanistan, there also seems to be positive changes in Pakistan, which will help resolve the issue soon," said Yasin Malik, a senior member of Kashmir's main separatist alliance.

"There is no doubt that after September 11, the world realises that burning international conflicts like Kashmir should not be left to fester."

Malik called on Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf to revive the dialogue process initiated at a landmark

leadership summit in July.

The summit ended in impasse as both sides differed on how to approach the Kashmir issue -- the cause of two full-scale wars between the South Asian nuclear rivals.

At the same time, Malik stressed that the Kashmiri people had to be consulted during the dialogue process.

"Kashmiris cannot be bystanders anymore," he said.

"Any peace process will have to involve the people of Kashmir in a meaningful, direct and effective way. It is our destiny at stake and it is our motherland in question."

Malik, who returned from the United States last week after undergoing brain surgery, said the international community also had a role to play, especially Washington which "for the first time in its history" has good relations with both India and Pakistan.

OIC displays inability to support Palestinians

AFP, Amman

During the meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Doha, the Muslim and Arab world seemed more powerless than ever to support the Palestinians with action, Arab officials say.

Monday's meeting in the Qatari capital, held in the absence of the Jordanian and Saudi foreign ministers, could do nothing more than call on the United States to implement "the positive aspects of its approach" on the issue of creating a Palestinian state, analysts say.

The OIC also decided to set up a ministerial committee to lobby the international community for "an immediate halt to the Israeli aggression" and obtain international protection for the Palestinians.

The panel comprising Malaysia, Mali, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Senegal and Syria, as well as OIC

chief Abdelwahed Belkeziz, will be tasked with contacts with the United States, Russia and European Union.

The meeting in Doha "was not any different from the three previous meetings of the past three months," a high-ranking Arab official told AFP Tuesday.

"In the face of the deterioration of the situation in the Palestinian territories targeted by Israeli aggressions, the Muslim and Arab world only succeeded in producing verbal support," he added on condition of anonymity.

Another Arab official said "you have to be realistic: the pressure tools are very limited, especially in the current context where Arab and Muslim countries are afraid of becoming targets of strikes by the United States" as part of their fight against terrorism, following the September 11 attacks against New York and Washington.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (C-R) and his minister of information, Yasser Abed Rabbo (3rd L), host an "iftar" -- the meal Muslims have after breaking their fast at sunset during the holy month of Ramadan -- for the European Union's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana (4th L), and EU special envoy to the Middle East Miguel Angel Moratinos (3rd R), following their meeting in the West Bank town of Ramallah on Tuesday. Solana told Arafat that he must fight Islamic "terrorist" suspects held responsible by Israel for a spate of deadly bombings.

Sultans meet to elect new Malaysian king

AP, Kuala Lumpur

Behind closed doors at the national palace, nine sultans began meeting Wednesday to elect one of their own as the new king of Malaysia.

The rulers were selecting a successor to Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, who died in office on Nov. 22 after complications from heart surgery.

Under an unusual rotational system, Malaysia's monarch is chosen by secret ballot by nine state sultans, the traditional rulers of fiefdoms which existed on the Malay peninsula for hundreds of years before colonisation.

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India successfully tests short range missile

AFP, New Delhi

India on Wednesday "successfully" test fired a homegrown short range surface to surface missile capable of carrying nuclear warheads, a defence spokesman said.

The "Prithvi" (Earth) missile blasted off at 10:41 (0511 GMT) at a national test range in the eastern Indian state of Orissa, the spokesman said.

"The missile which was test-fired was the 250 kilometre range (155 miles) version, developed by our scientists for the air force," the spokesman said.

"The test was successful and was flawless," he added.

An official release issued by the Indian defence ministry said the missile hit its intended target.

Another version of the Prithvi - capable of delivering a one-tonne warhead to a distance of 150 kilometres (93 miles) in just 300 seconds - is already in service with the army, the release added.

The Prithvi is part of an Indian arsenal of guided missiles including several versions of the ballistic Agni (Fire), which can hit targets with nuclear warheads at distances ranging between 1,500 kilometres (930 miles) and 2,500 kilometres (1,550 miles).

4 Palestinians killed as Israel pounds Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli helicopters killed four Palestinians in an overnight raid in the Gaza Strip, just hours after US peace envoy Anthony Zinni asked Israel to refrain from attacks for 48 hours to give the Palestinians a chance to crack down on hardliners.

At least three of the four were said by residents in the southern Gaza Strip town of Khan Yunis to be militants from the Palestinian Popular Resistance, a broad-based militia movement, drawn mainly from Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement.

Around 17 other people were wounded when US-made Apache

helicopters blasted the Palestinian Authority's national security building early Tuesday, then returned half an hour later and fired two more rockets at the building in a residential part of Khan Yunis.

Witnesses said the second raid hit an adjacent refugee camp.

An Israeli army source said the military had detected "terrorists" in the area.

"An army force identified a group of terrorists which opened fire at an army outpost in the center of Gush Katif settlement bloc. Helicopter forces returned fire and identified a hit," the source said.

The army also claimed that the "rockets were not fired at buildings."

Israeli helicopters killed two Palestinian children, aged three and 13, on Monday in a failed assassination bid on a militant leader from the headline group Islamic Jihad, who survived the West Bank attack with serious injuries.

The latest strikes aimed to pile pressure on Arafat to crack down on hardline Islamic groups like Jihad and Hamas.

Arafat is diplomatically isolated after devastating Hamas suicide strikes at the beginning of the month slaughtered 26 people in a Jerusalem cafe district and on a Haifa bus.

Days of ABM treaty numbered: Bush

AFP, Charleston

US President George W. Bush on Tuesday vowed not to let the 1972 ABM Treaty stop him from deploying a missile shield, amid reports he may announce US withdrawal from the accord in days.

"We must move beyond the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, a treaty that was written in a different era, for a different enemy," the president told a rowdy crowd of students at a military college here.

Bush's comments came after Russia's ITAR-TASS news agency, citing anonymous sources, said the United States was planning to announce unilateral secession from the agreement soon, perhaps as early as December 13.

"The time is coming when we will need to move beyond the ABM Treaty," White House national security spokesman Sean McCormack on being asked about the reports. "The president will let you know. The time is near."

ITAR-TASS indicated that Moscow had been informed of Washington's imminent decision during the just completed visit there of US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Nepal seeks global help to fight Maoist rebels

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal said yesterday it needed financial support from international donors to fund its battle against Maoist rebels trying to overthrow the constitutional monarchy in the Himalayan kingdom.

"We are doing the home work for the exact amount but we have already sounded our requirements for support to donors," Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat told Reuters.

Nepal declared a state of emergency last month and ordered its army to crush rebels of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)

after they pulled out of four-month-old peace talks and launched a string of deadly attacks on security posts.

The rebels, who derive their inspiration from Peru's Shining Path guerrillas, are campaigning to set up a one-party communist republic in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

Mahat said Nepal, among the poorest nations in the world, had to divert about four billion Nepali rupees (\$52.3 million) to fight the guerrillas from funds earmarked for development projects in villages.

Over 80 per cent of Nepal's 23 million people live in villages.

Hundreds of Taliban, Al-Qaida members have escaped

AFP, Washington

Hundreds of Taliban and Al-Qaida troops, including many of their remaining leaders, have escaped from Afghanistan into neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, NBC News reported Tuesday.

Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar remains missing and is believed to be holed up outside the southern city of Kandahar, the province's governor Gul Agha said Tuesday.

But US officials believe that almost all of the remaining top 22 Taliban leaders have escaped into Pakistan, NBC News reported, quoting Pentagon sources.

As US soldiers tried to block escape routes, US-backed Afghan fighters waited to see if a group of Al-

Qaida members near the eastern mountainous Tora Bora region, near the border with Pakistan, would surrender, NBC said.

Meanwhile, as many as 500 Taliban and Al-Qaida troops captured in the northern cities of Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz have bought safe passage into Iran, the network reported, citing informed sources.

Most have escaped on foot or horseback over remote mountain trails, according to the report. One top leader was wounded and still escaped.

Soldiers from the US 10th Mountain Division are patrolling the areas along the Pakistani border, while Pakistan said it had sent 4,000 troops to the area, NBC News said.



PHOTO: AFP
US singer Barbra Streisand displays her trophy for the first 2001 Rainbow/PUSH Coalition Liberty and Justice Award on Tuesday in Beverly Hills, California. Streisand was given the award for her charity and humanitarian activities.