

Accord on deployment of int'l force for 6 months

Multinational force will not be in charge of Afghan security: Fahim

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's interim government agreed Wednesday to accept a 3,000-strong multinational force for six months with a limited security mandate.

Mohammad Qasim Fahim, the defence minister in the interim government to take office Saturday, said that under an agreement with British military officials, the peacekeepers would be deployed from Saturday for six months.

The 3,000 troops would be deployed in three fields, Fahim, a Northern Alliance general, told reporters at the defence ministry.

One thousand would focus on security affairs and another 1,000 would concentrate on medical, engineering and logistics work as part of Afghanistan's reconstruction.

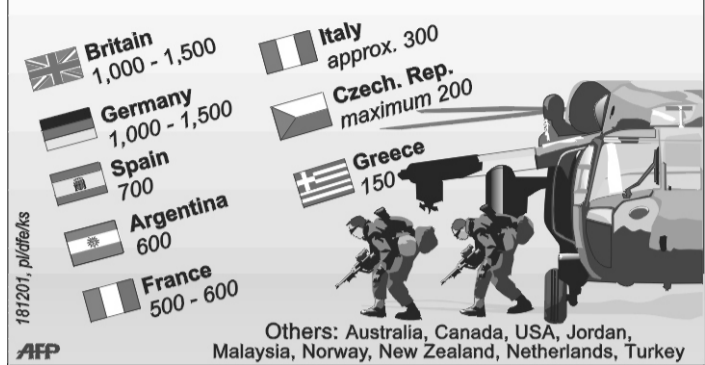
Fahim said the remainder would constitute a reserve force probably based at Bagram Airport, some 50 km north of Kabul.

The first 100 British Marines are expected in Kabul on Saturday and officials said they would assist in the security for the inauguration of the new government.

But the minister said: "The time limitation for the peacekeepers will be from the day of handing over of power on December 22 until when Afghanistan has an elected government after the convening of the Loya Jirga."

Multinational force for Afghanistan

Countries contributing soldiers



19/12/01, photo/afp

AFP

The interim government led by Hamid Karzai is to rule for six months when a Loya Jirga assembly of elders will appoint a new transitional authority that will govern for up to two years and organise elections.

The force was part of an accord struck in Germany this month by rival Afghan groups who named Karzai as interim leader.

But Fahim also stressed that the international force would not run Afghanistan's security affairs.

"The people of Afghanistan liberated their country by themselves and international forces will come here mainly for the reconstruction of Afghanistan," he told reporters.

However, the 16 countries had wanted a far wider mandate, which could include troops patrolling the main roads from Kabul to other Afghan cities.

"For the time being these forces can be in Kabul because the handover (of power to the interim administration) will take place in Kabul," Fahim said. "But there is no decision yet on other provinces."

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's 3,000-strong multinational force will not be in overall charge of security for the country, interim Defence Minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim said Wednesday.

"The people of Afghanistan liberated their country by themselves and international forces will come here mainly for the reconstruction of Afghanistan," General Fahim told reporters.

11 detained for attack on Indian parliament

AFP, Srinagar

Police in Indian-administered Kashmir overnight picked up 11 more people for questioning over last week's attack on the Indian parliament, an officer said Wednesday.

The suspects, detained by counter-insurgency police in Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar and the northern town of Baramulla, include the brother of a Delhi University teacher arrested Sunday on charges of being part of the parliamentary attack conspiracy.

A police official said the 11 people were being interrogated and that "nothing substantive" had yet emerged about any involvement in the assault on parliament.

Myanmar appoints 10 army commanders

AP, Yangon

Myanmar has appointed 10 new regional army commanders to replace generals who were reassigned to the capital last month in a reshuffle of the regime's top ranks, an official source said Wednesday.

Ten divisional commanders were promoted Tuesday to fill positions left vacant after the most significant revamp of the military regime in four years, the source said on condition of anonymity.

The reshuffle appears to consolidate the authority of the top three generals, junta leader Senior Gen. Than Shwe, army chief Gen. Maung Aye and military intelligence chief Lt Gen Khin Nyunt.

Fire damages cathedral in New York

AP, New York

A fierce fire broke out in the century-old Cathedral of St John the Divine, filling one of the largest churches in the world with smoke and severely damaging two rare 17th century tapestries just a week before Christmas.

The flames that broke out Tuesday morning at the massive Gothic stone structure were confined to a gift shop, which was destroyed. But as much as 3 inches (8 centimeters) of water covered the floor of the nave.

Bishop Mark Sisk said Christmas services would go on, but other seasonal events including two performances of Handel's "Messiah" were left in doubt. The cathedral is the principal church of the Episcopal Diocese of New York.

9 Christians killed in Maluku Islands

AP, Jakarta

Unidentified gunmen on a speedboat opened fire on a ferry carrying Christians in Indonesia's eastern Maluku Islands on Wednesday, killing at least nine people, witnesses and medical officials said.

The victims were fish and vegetable traders traveling to an early morning market in Ambon, the provincial capital. The gunmen were traveling from a Muslim area of town and were armed with automatic weapons, witnesses said.

Last week, seven Christians were killed in an explosion on a boat in the same waters.

Arafat closes Hamas offices as ties with Israel resume

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian security forces closed six offices of the radical Hamas group in overnight operations, as reports emerged that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has asked a top security official to open talks with his Palestinian counterparts.

The United States urged Israel to resume direct talks with the Palestinians, after Sharon severed all ties with Yasser Arafat in anger at his failure to prevent devastating attacks on Israelis.

And as violence on the ground continued to ebb, Israel's foreign ministry gave an upbeat assessment of Arafat's call for peace at the weekend.

Washington also maintained pressure on Arafat to push ahead with his promised clamp down on militant activity, seen as a key step to ending almost 15 months of violence which have left more than 1,100 people dead and which scaled new heights this month.

Palestinian security forces, some in ski masks to protect their identity, sealed off six Hamas offices, spray-painting the closure order on their walls.

Officers stood with guns poised as the offices were sealed, then sped through the Gaza City streets in a convoy of five jeeps until they reached their next stop.

"This is Arafat's decision and everyone must abide by it," one intelligence officer told AFP at the scene.

A high-ranking Palestinian security official said the Palestinian Authority had also arrested eight renegade members of its Gaza Strip security and police branches who were not committed to the ceasefire.

A Hamas source said Palestinian police also arrested four of the movement's members at Bethlehem in the West Bank.

While demanding more from Arafat, US officials also implicitly called for Israel to pull back on its declaration last week that the Palestinian leader is "irrelevant."

50 m children vulnerable to sexual exploitation

AFP, Yokohama

Fifty million children around the world did not have their birth registered, making them easy prey for prostitution networks, according to experts in the field attending a UNICEF conference here.

The number represents a 25 percent increase on the last figure published by the United Nations Children's Fund in 1998, according to Ellen Mouravieff-Apostol, who attended the workshop session of the Second World Congress Against Sexual Exploitation of Children in Yokohama.

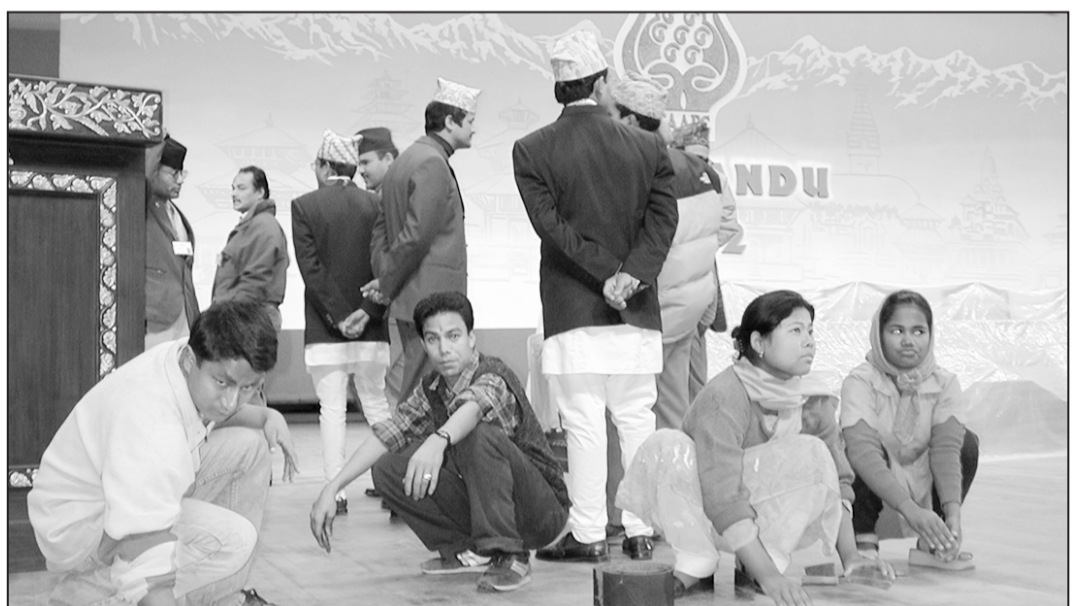
Some regions are more affected than others: in sub-Saharan Africa 71 percent of children are not registered, while in South Asia, the figure is 63 percent, dropping to 10 percent in Central and Eastern Europe and still two percent in the most industrialised nations.

The situation appears to be getting worse despite the recent efforts of a number of countries such as Thailand (where in contrast to past practice, virtually 100 percent of births are registered), and the Philippines (where the comparable figure is 80 percent).

According to UNICEF's coordinator in Uganda, Kori Egge, 90 percent of the population of the East African country are unregistered, despite the fact that registration at birth was recognised as a universal right under the 1989 convention on the rights of the child.

More than 10,000 teenagers have been abducted by North Ugandan rebels to become child soldiers or to provide sexual services, children who are impossible to trace because they have no official identity.

Similarly, more than one million children orphaned by AIDS in Uganda are unable to inherit their parents' home or possessions because they have no papers to prove their identity, making them easy targets for traffickers to be exploited as labourers or sexually, Egge said.



Workers prepare the floor of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit stage in Kathmandu on Wednesday. Nepal is about to host the 11th SAARC summit scheduled for January 4 to 6, that will be attended by SAARC countries' heads of state or governments.

Armed men land on isle in Comoros, seize control

Four killed as Comoran troops arrive in Moheli

AFP, Moroni

Armed men claiming to be US soldiers landed on the Comoran isle of Moheli early Wednesday and seized control of its security forces, witnesses including a former prime minister said.

As the Comoran army prepared to fly troops by commercial jet to Moheli, the smallest of the islands making up the Indian Ocean chain, the US embassy in Nairobi and the Pentagon both said they had no knowledge of the incident.

A man describing himself as the

leader of the invasion force spoke accentless French, according to one source who spoke to him by phone.

"Armed men landed on Moheli this morning," confirmed a Comoran army officer, adding that all military personnel had been summoned from the country's main military base at Kandani, six kilometers north of Moroni.

Since gaining independence from France in 1975, the Comoro islands, which lie between the northern tip of Madagascar and Mozambique, have suffered coup

after coup, many of them achieved with the help of foreign mercenaries such as France's notorious Bob Denard.

Telephone links with the island were cut shortly after around 100 armed men -- some described as white and others black, some of them masked -- disembarked at 5:30 am (0230 GMT).

Meanwhile, four people were killed Wednesday in the Comoran island of Moheli as government soldiers flew in after foreign troops took over the island earlier in the day, a government source told AFP.

Naga rebels declare Christmas truce

AFP, Guwahati

A powerful tribal separatist group in India's northeastern state of Nagaland announced a month-long ceasefire beginning Wednesday to enable people to celebrate Christmas and the New Year.

"With Christmas and the New Year approaching, the Naga army will strictly bind themselves towards suspension of military operations and take up a defensive front," Kitovi Zhimomi, self-styled prime minister of a main faction of the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), said in a statement.

"Keeping with the sacred code of unity and peace, we declare a ceasefire amongst warring Naga brothers for a period of 30 days effective from December 19," the statement said.

UNP nominee wins Speaker election

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's new government passed its first test Wednesday as its nominee elected speaker of parliament and immediately laid the ground for a showdown with the island's president.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe promised new laws to increase the power of the legislature -- a move seen as a challenge to President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who is a member of the opposition People's Alliance.

The prime minister's United National Party (UNP) saw its senior member Joseph Michael Perera, 60, elected speaker of the 225-member assembly unchallenged by the opposition.

Chinese diplomats in Kabul to reopen embassy

AFP, Beijing

Chinese diplomats returned to Kabul Wednesday to reopen their embassy for the first time since 1993, state media said.

Senior foreign ministry official Zhang Min arrived at the Bagram air base about 50 km north of Kabul on a chartered UN flight from Pakistan, the Xinhua news agency reported.

"China closed its embassy in Kabul in 1993 for security reasons, and this time, we are planning to inspect our embassy buildings and try to resume our diplomatic mission at proper time," Zhang said on arrival.

"We will also hold a flag raising ceremony and replace the old national flag," he said.

Zhang, China's charge d'affaires in Kabul before the 1993 closure, is also expected to open channels with the new Afghan interim government headed by Hamid Karzai, the report said.

Suharto's condition 'stable'

AFP, Jakarta

The condition of former Indonesian dictator Suharto, who is seriously ill in a Jakarta hospital, is improving slowly, one of his doctors told AFP on Wednesday.

The 80-year-old, who has suffered at least one stroke, was hospitalised on Monday suffering from pneumonia.

Juniarti Hatta, Suharto's private cardiologist, told AFP that the patient was improving "but at a very slow pace."

"We are still monitoring his blood's sugar level since he is a diabetic," Hatta said. But he added that Suharto's heart -- now attached to a pacemaker -- was in "excellent" shape.

An aide to Suharto who did not want to be identified said earlier Wednesday: "We can see that his condition has begun to stabilise... from yesterday evening until now, there has been no complaint from him."

Videotape on Laden genuine: Riyadh

AFP, Riyadh

The videotape released by the Pentagon showing Osama bin Laden rejoicing over the September 11 terror attacks is "genuine", Saudi Defence Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz was quoted as saying Wednesday.

"Some people had doubts that the videotape was fake and fabricated by the United States. This is untrue. The videotape is genuine," the prince told Al-Iqtisadiyah business daily in the first official reaction to the tape from within the kingdom.

"Undoubtedly, (i) the videotape (bin Laden) does not show any sanity, or military and national leadership," he said.

Pakistan building up troops on border: Indian army chief

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan has massed troops along its border with India and New Delhi has taken "appropriate" measures to counter any threat, India's army chief said Wednesday.

"There is a build-up on the other side. They have moved certain forces in there. Certain forces which should have gone back have not gone back," General S. Padmanabhan told reporters on the sidelines of a seminar in New Delhi.

He declined to give details about any Indian counter-deployment, saying only: "I have acted in a manner that was appropriate."

Tensions have been rising between the South Asian nuclear powers since India at the weekend accused Pakistan's intelligence services of instigating an attack on parliament last Thursday that killed 13 people, including five gunmen.

Islamabad has denied the accusations and warned India against any action against Pakistan.

The army chief did not speculate on any Indian action against Pakistan, saying that any such move would be "a political decision."

Some hawkish members of the ruling Hindu-nationalist coalition have called for tough reprisals against Pakistan, including strikes on Muslim militant camps in

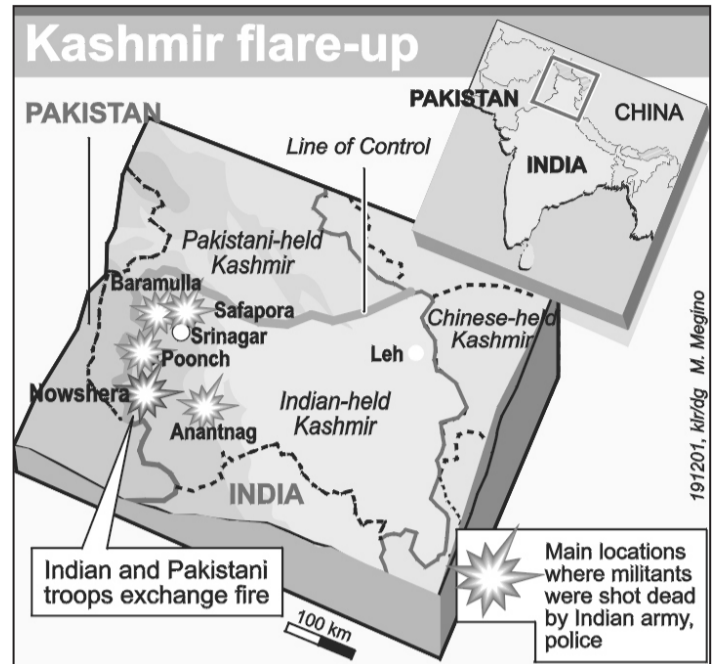
Pakistani-administered Kashmir.

Meanwhile, India's main opposition leader Wednesday urged the government to mount a "diplomatic offensive" in the wake of last week's attack on parliament but assured her party's support in principle in the fight against terrorism.

"We should certainly be able to

embark upon a very concerted diplomatic offensive and garner the support of the international community for our just cause," Congress leader Sonia Gandhi told the lower house of parliament.

"We feel that much greater efforts are required to mobilise public opinion," she said.



Indian soldiers stand guard in a trench after reports of Pakistani troops movements on Wednesday at a Kachrial post in Pallanwalla sector, 85 km west of Jammu. Indian and Pakistani troops traded fire over their disputed border in Kashmir overnight in the first such exchange since New Delhi accused Islamabad of instigating last week's attack on the Indian parliament.

Tigers declare truce in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels Wednesday announced a unilateral ceasefire from Christmas Eve, saying the move was aimed at promoting a fresh peace bid to end decades of ethnic bloodshed.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they ordered their cadres not to carry out any attacks for one month from December 24 and hoped that the new government, led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, would reciprocate.

The LTTE, in a one-page statement, said it could extend the truce depending on the government's reaction.

"If the Sri Lankan government reciprocates positively ... and takes immediate steps to remove the economic embargo and other restrictions, the LTTE will favourably consider extending the period of ceasefire to create cordial conditions for a stable peace and de-escalation," the statement said.

The economic embargo is government restrictions on goods going into areas held by the LTTE in the north and east of the country.

The LTTE announcement came as parliament held its first session since the December 5 parliamentary elections, which Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) won.

The UNP campaigned on a

promise to open peace talks with Tamil Tiger guerrillas who have been waging a drawn out campaign for an independent homeland for minority Tamils in the island's north-east.

"Encouraged by the collective mandate for peace and ethnic harmony given by the (majority) Sinhala and (minority) Tamil masses at the general election, the LTTE leadership has decided to declare, unilaterally, a month-long cessation of armed hostilities," the statement said.

The LTTE declared a similar Christmas truce last year and extended it for four months, but the then government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga refused to