

UN mandates force for Kabul

AFP, Kabul

US and Northern Alliance forces scoured caves and valleys for signs of still-elusive terror suspect Osama bin Laden, while fugitive al-Qaida fighters battled Pakistani troops after escaping across the border.

British commandos arrived on the ground in Afghanistan to spearhead an international security force mandated by the United Nations for a six-month deployment. The soldiers first assignment will be to safeguard Saturday's ceremonies inaugurating a new interim government.

And in the United States, exactly 100 days since terror strikes on New York and the Pentagon which killed more than 3,000 people, President George W. Bush announced stiff new measures designed to deprive two suspected terror groups in South Asia of their funding.

The UN Security Council Thursday authorised the deployment of a multinational peacekeeping force to Kabul and surrounding areas, which will number several thousand British, French and other NATO troops.

The force, to be led by Britain for the first three months, is tasked with ensuring the proper functioning of



Britain's Ambassador to the United Nations Jeremy Greenstock votes on a United Nations Security Council resolution to provide emergency international assistance to Afghanistan on Thursday in New York.

Afghanistan's interim government, which will step into the vacuum left by the ouster of the Taliban, due to be installed on Saturday for six months.
The British daily The Independent reported Friday that British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Italy, Spain, Canada and Jordan will be among the first countries to provide troops for the 5,000-strong force.

An advance party of 53 British Marines flew to Bagram airbase near Kabul Thursday to seed the 3,000-strong force, just hours before the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously to authorise the troops' deployment.
The British contingent is due to swell to up to 1,500.

Company commander Major Matt Jones told reporters that the mission was "quite clear. It is security and assistance for the interim government. We're quite happy with that."

"It's a peace support operation for want of a better phrase. We will not be guarding any locations. We will be providing a presence."

Their mission is to provide security to the interim government to be headed by Pashtun tribal leader Hamid Karzai for six months.

A Loya Jirga -- traditional grand assembly of elders -- will then set up a transitional authority to rule the country for up to two years to be followed by elections.

US forces supporting Afghan troops continued to search the caves and tunnels of eastern Afghanistan for members of Bin Laden's al-Qaida network. Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke said.

Unrest forces Argentine govt to quit

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentine President Fernando de la Rúa resigned Thursday as opposition Peronist leaders rejected his call for a national unity government amid growing unrest over economic austerity policies aimed at staving off financial collapse.

"I address you to present my resignation as president," de la Rúa wrote in a message to the opposition-controlled Congress.
"My message today to ensure (the country's) governability and to form a government of national unity was rejected by the parliamentary leaders."

A leading lawmaker said the Senate and Chamber of Deputies would meet Friday in joint session to elect an interim president.

"Consensus will emerge in the coming hours on the name. Any member of the legislature could be elected as well as any of the 24 provincial governors," Peronist majority leader Senator Jose Luis Gioja said.
The interim president will fill the remaining two years of de la Rúa's term which expires in December 2003.

Argentina's caretaker president Ramon Puerta urged de la Rúa's cabinet to remain in office to avoid creating a power vacuum.

De la Rúa's resignation came a day after he declared a state of emergency and shortly after the Peronists refused his call to join the government to confront a worsening crisis prompted by nearly four years of recession and an impending default on a 132-billion-dollar public debt.

The Argentine Central Bank declared a bank holiday for Friday, saying financial institutions could only open to pay salaries and pensions for government workers.

Outside the presidential palace here, thousands of protesters celebrated as news of de la Rúa's resignation spread. A helicopter carried the former president away from the palace.

"We will not bend. We will remain here until de la Rúa goes away," said lanina Ojeda, a nurse among the protesters gathered nearby, her eyes filled with tears from the effects of gas grenades thrown by police.

Authorities said at least 21 people have died, with hundreds injured, since street protests and looting across the country erupted Wednesday.



Russia, US fail to reach agreement on Iraq

AFP, Moscow

Moscow and Washington have failed to reach agreement on a new sanctions regime for Iraq after Russia ruled out its support for military strikes aimed at ousting strongman Saddam Hussein, Russian officials conceded Friday.

"The Russian side is categorically against conducting a military operation in regards to Baghdad in the framework of the next phase in the fight against international terrorism," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ordzhonikidze said in a statement.

The foreign ministry added that Russian negotiators and visiting US Assistant Secretary of State John stem Wolf had reached agreement only on "certain questions" during two-day talks held here about a new Iraqi sanctions regime.

Embassies in Manila evacuated as police blows up bomb

AFP, Manila

British and Canadian diplomats were evacuated from their embassies here Friday as police detonated an improvised bomb in the financial district of Makati, police and witnesses said.

Bomb squads rushed to the site in mid-morning after an anonymous telephoned threat led to the discovery of a suspicious-looking package outside the Allied Bank building opposite the Philippine Stock Exchange.

The Allied Bank building, which houses the Canadian embassy and the Philippine Airlines head office, and nearby buildings including the British embassy were evacuated and the area cordoned off.

8 arrested in Somalia for terror links

AFP, Nairobi

Eight foreigners suspected of having links to terrorism were arrested in Somalia on Thursday, an official of the Somali transitional government (TNG) said in Nairobi on Friday.

The eight were arrested in several swoops and were being questioned by intelligence services, while others were still being sought Friday, said the source.

He added that the government had decided to systematically register foreigners in the country.

Milosevic files complaint at European court

AFP, Strasbourg

Former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic has filed a complaint at the European Court of Human Rights against his detention at The Hague on war crimes charges, the court said in a statement Friday.

Milosevic invoked articles in the European Convention of Human Rights guaranteeing the rights to liberty and security, a fair trial, freedom of expression, an effective remedy, and the prohibition of discrimination.

The statement said Milosevic's complaints were directed against his arrest, detention and court proceedings at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague.

The 60-year-old Serb nationalist has been indicted on charges including genocide, crimes against humanity and other war crimes for his role in the wars in Croatia from 1991-92, in Bosnia from 1992-95 and in Kosovo in 1999.

India, Pakistan compete for diplomatic spotlight

AFP, New Delhi

Escalating tensions between India and Pakistan are focusing international attention on South Asia to the joint gratification and discomfort of the region's two nuclear powers.

The United States, China and Russia are all expressed concern over the possibility of a regional conflict with the military on both sides of the Indo-Pakistan border on high alert and moving extra troops to the frontier.

The sharp rise in tensions followed India's accusation that Pakistan-based militant groups, acting at the behest of Pakistani military intelligence, carried out the December 13 attack on the parliament complex in New Delhi.

India has said it is keeping "all options open" including military retaliation, while Pakistan has warned that it will respond in kind to any act of "adventurism" by its neighbour and arch-rival.

For both countries, the spotlight of global attention carries benefits and annoyances.

India has finally got the recognition it has been craving that the country has long been a target of terrorist attacks.

US President George W. Bush on Thursday described the assault on parliament which killed 14

people including the five armed assailants as "only the most recent terrorist attack on the institutions of Indian democracy."

India also welcomed Friday Bush's announcement to freeze the assets of the Lashkar-e-Taiba, one of two militant groups blamed by India for the attack.

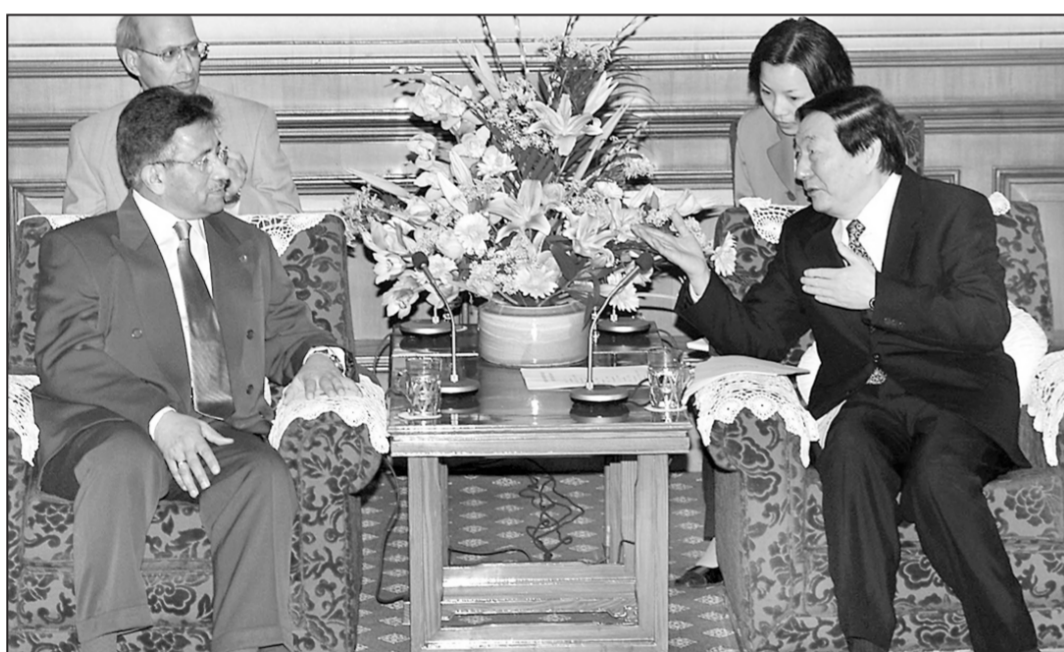
"It was long expected, I'm glad that the (Lashkar) is now included in the list of terrorists prepared by the US," Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said.

However, India will be unhappy with the president's description of Lashkar as a "stateless" sponsor of terrorism intent on destroying Indo-Pakistan relations.

New Delhi insists that Lashkar and other militant groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir are sheltered, trained and funded by Pakistan as front line troops in a "proxy war" in the Himalayan region.

International appeals for Indian "restraint" in the wake of the parliament attack have provided New Delhi a degree of diplomatic leverage which it hopes to use to undermine Pakistan's newly-acquired status as a front-line state in the international alliance against terrorism.

At the same time, however, allowing Indo-Pakistan tensions to spiral to dangerous levels will bring pressure for some sort of third party mediation or intervention, which Pakistan courts but India bitterly opposes.



Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf listens to Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji (R) during a meeting at the Diaoyu State Guesthouse in Beijing on Friday. Musharraf began the second day of talks with Chinese leaders that prominently featured the future of war-ravaged Afghanistan.

No link between Iraq and terror attacks: Jack Straw

AFP, London

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has seen no evidence to link Iraq with the September 11 attacks on the US, and has played down speculation that America will take military action against President Saddam Hussein's regime, the Independent reported Friday.

"On the general issue of military action, it is only ever contemplated on the basis of very good evidence pointing to that necessity and after a very careful conclusion that military action is the only possible option."

"On that basis, the only theatre in

which we are currently involved in military action is Afghanistan."

In his interview, Straw also predicted that alleged terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, who the British government believes is still in Afghanistan, would be captured.

The foreign secretary said: "My view is that sooner or later he will be found. It is impossible for a man on whom there is that focus and that bounty to escape for long."

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US-led coalition to help Afghan reconstruction

AFP, Islamabad

The US-led anti-terrorist coalition said Friday it would work with Afghanistan's new government to help in reconstruction of the war-ravaged country and ensure future peace and stability.

Coalition spokesman Kenton Keith, on the eve of the inauguration of new interim administration led by Hamid Karzai, said that just because the Taliban regime had been routed, its work was far from complete.

"The new administration faces a daunting task. To pull the country together after decades of war. To begin the difficult work of reconstruction ... to be a force of stability in the region rather than a hallmark of war and repression.

"Our commitment is not just to destroying al-Qaida and removing the Taliban. It is to the long-term reconstruction of Afghanistan as a peaceful and stable country," he told reporters.

Keith said one small step in that process was taken when the UN Security Council agreed unanimously Thursday on the mandate for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

The vote took place in time to allow an advance party of 53 British Royal Marine Commandos to arrive in Kabul to provide security for Saturday's handover ceremony.

The resolution did not agree the final number of troops but "we can expect it to be between 3,000 and 5,000", Keith said.

UNGA calls for deployment of observers in ME

Israel bans Arafat's Bethlehem trip

AFP, United Nations

The UN General Assembly on Thursday passed a non-binding resolution calling for observers in the occupied territories that had been vetoed by the United States less than one week ago in the Security Council.

The Palestinian-sponsored resolution, debated in an emergency session demanded by the Arab League and the non-aligned movement, passed by an overwhelming majority.

An earlier version of the text had been torpedoed early Saturday in the Security Council by the United States, which said it ignored facts on the ground, particularly a recent spate of deadly Palestinian bombings in Israel and the territories.

The resolution passed with 124 nations voting in favour and six voting against, including the United States, Israel and four small Pacific islands. Twenty-five nations, Great Britain among them, abstained.

The body also passed a separate resolution condemning Israeli settlements in the territories, including Jerusalem, calling them illegal and an obstacle to peace.

This resolution passed by a vote of 133 in favour, four against, and sixteen abstaining.

"The Israeli occupation of our land and our people remains the main predicament and the origin of all the disasters," said Nasser al-Kidwa, permanent Palestinian observer to the United Nations, who also accused Israel of "state-sponsored terrorism."

"The only solution for the situation we are in is an end to the occu-

pation and the realisation of the rights of our people."

Israel, for its part, chided Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for a policy of "duplicity and deceit and evasion."

"It is repeatedly claimed that the root of the conflict in our region is the occupation," said Aaron Jacob, Israel's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations.

"But with the images of murdered and maimed Israelis filling television screens on a daily basis, any objective observer would be forced to acknowledge that terrorism is the immediate and central obstacle to peaceful dialogue."

Meanwhile, Israel will ban Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat from visiting Christ's birthplace Bethlehem in the West Bank this Christmas unless he first arrests the

killers of Israeli tourism minister Rehavam Zeevi, Israeli radio reported Friday.

"Yasser Arafat has not yet presented a request to go to Bethlehem, but if he did it would be turned down so long as he has not had the two killers of the minister arrested," said an official who asked to remain anonymous.

The minister of tourism was slain on October 17 in east Jerusalem.

The official also demanded the arrest of Ahmed Saadat, head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) which claimed the assassination.

He said the three men were in the Palestinian autonomous zone of Ramallah in the West Bank.

Arafat usually heads the celebrations of the nativity, attending the midnight mass.

China, Pakistan pledge support for new Afghan govt

AP, Beijing

Visiting Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf and his Chinese counterpart, Jiang Zemin, affirmed support for Afghanistan's interim government and efforts to rebuild the war-ravaged country, a Chinese official said Friday.

On the eve of the swearing-in Saturday of the new Afghan leadership, Jiang pledged 30 million Yuan (dls 3.6 million) in aid "to express our concern and care for the Afghan people," said Foreign Ministry official Sun Guoxiang.

Musharraf and Jiang also discussed Pakistani-Indian tensions Thursday at the start of the Pakistani leader's four-day visit, said Sun, deputy director general of the ministry's Asia bureau. He said Jiang stressed China's desire to see peace between the two nuclear-armed South Asian rivals.

The presidents expressed support for the post-Taliban government agreed to at talks in Bonn, Germany, Sun said. The administration, led by Prime Minister-designate Hamid Karzai, is to take office Saturday and serve for six months.

"In the coming six months, both Pakistan and China

will support this process," Sun said at a news conference.

Pakistan's foreign minister had said Musharraf and Jiang would discuss what kind of Afghan government they wanted to see, but Sun wouldn't give any more details. Pakistani officials weren't immediately available for comment.

Musharraf met Friday with premier Zhu Rongji, who visited Pakistan about six months ago.

"I am worried about you almost every day," Zhu said, prompting laughter from Musharraf and members of his delegation. The Pakistani leader declined to take questions before foreign reporters were ushered out of the meeting.

Musharraf also planned to meet with Li Peng, the leader of China's legislature, and Vice President Hu Jintao, who is expected to take power when Jiang retires.

Musharraf's visit, his first to China since the Sept. 11 attacks, is aimed at assuring Beijing of solid ties with Pakistan, a long time ally that has developed closer relations with Washington in the American-led war on terrorism.

S Korea lifts anti-terror security alert

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korea on Friday appeared close to resuming dialogue as the South offered food aid and tensions on the Korean peninsula eased with the US-led campaign in Afghanistan winding down.

A defence ministry spokesman said South Korea had lifted a military security alert it had imposed following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States as the war in Afghanistan was drawing to a close.

"Starting from the end of November, we put the armed forces back to their normal security status," the spokesman told AFP.

New Zealand lifts sanctions on Fiji

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand Friday lifted sanctions against the Fiji after the Commonwealth earlier in the day readmitted the Pacific nation as a full member.

However Foreign Minister Phil Goff said in a statement that alleged coup leader George Speight and others associated with the take over of Parliament last year were still banned from New Zealand.

Fiji was suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth, but not from the organisation itself, after the May 19, 2000 coup when Speight and a band of special forces soldiers seized parliament and took then prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his government hostage for 56 days.

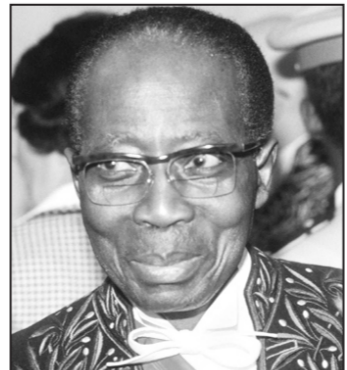
Australia turns back another boatload of migrants

AFP, Sydney

Another boatload of illegal immigrants has been forced by the Australian navy to go back to Indonesia where it came from, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock said Friday.

The vessel, carrying 160 people, had been intercepted north of Ashmore Reef, off Australia north-west, earlier this week.

Ruddock said Australian Defence Force personnel boarded the vessel and prevented it proceeding further.



A picture taken March 29, 1994 shows poet and former Senegal President Leopold Sedar Senghor in Paris during his reception at the French Academie. Leopold Sedar Senghor died on Thursday in France.