

## Omar's days are numbered as forces tighten dragnet

### US bombings kill 32 civilians

AFP, Kabul

Afghan tribal leaders met Friday to discuss the fate of former Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar while US forces hunting Osama bin Laden bombed a camp used by his al-Qaida network of Islamic radicals.

Nasratullah Nasrat, an official in Kandahar's provincial intelligence services, told AFP that Omar was in the hands of a Taliban commander who was in negotiations with tribal chiefs to surrender with 1,500 of his men.

"We can't wait longer than one or two days, otherwise of course we will attack them," he said by telephone. However, Nasrat denied reports that Omar's capture was imminent.

Reports of the meeting appeared to confirm that the conflict in southern Afghanistan has entered its endgame, even as US officers announced fresh bombing runs and a top aid official said famine had been averted.

Moves to build a UN-mandated security force to ensure Afghanistan's peaceful future also proceeded apace, with Bangladesh using a visit by British Prime Minister Tony Blair to confirm its troops could take part.

US bombers resumed their attacks Friday on a sprawling Taliban stronghold and al-Qaida training camp in eastern Afghanistan, about which top US military commander Richard Myers said: "There was activity that warranted it to be hit."

US bombs fell on a site in Zhawar in Khost province, near Afghanistan's eastern border with Pakistan, described as an extensive leadership facility consisting of a base camp, training facility and caves.

The compound had been struck before in a 1998 US cruise missile attack designed to punish al-Qaida for its alleged role in the bombing of two US embassies in East Africa, Myers said.

It was the first confirmed US air strike since December 28, and follows a pattern of selective strikes aimed at Taliban and al-Qaida leaders who have been on the run since the fall of Kandahar last month.

The raids killed 32 civilians in villages nearby, according to the well-connected news agency the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP).

The Pakistan-based agency said local tribal elders had travelled to the city of Khost to appeal for an end to the bombardment which is aimed at wiping out remaining fighters with Osama bin Laden's terror network.

"The bombing is very intense and very heavy. Many people have died. The United States should stop bombing. They are all civilians in this area," Tani tribe elder Ghazi Nawaz Tani was quoted as saying.

US officials have confirmed that warplanes Thursday launched an attack on a sprawling al-Qaida leadership compound and training camp in Pakia province.

Talks were continuing Friday in southern Helmand province between tribal elders and Taliban commander Abdul Ahad, also known as Rayes Baghran (chief of Baghran), who pledged to surrender with his 1,500 followers and hand Omar over in exchange for a halt to the US bombing, Nasrat said.

The shura, or meeting of tribal elders, began on Tuesday and Nasrat made it clear that while no steps would be taken to apprehend Omar while it was in session.

Abdul Ahad had told the shura that his fighters included Taliban militiamen who have fled from other parts of Afghanistan, as well as some members of the al-Qaida terrorist network of Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden.

Meanwhile, Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged mortar and small arms fire overnight along their tense border in Kashmir, as their leaders prepared for a frosty meeting at a South Asian regional summit in Nepal.

The start of the summit was delayed until Saturday after bad weather delayed the arrival from China of Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, who touched down aboard an Air China flight at around 3.35pm (0950 GMT).

US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan spoke by telephone Thursday, agreeing that the two countries should find a peaceful solution to their dispute, the New China News Agency reported.

## Indo-Pak exchange of fire continues

AFP, Jammu

Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged mortar and small arms fire overnight along their tense border in Kashmir, as their leaders prepared for a frosty meeting at a South Asian regional summit in Nepal.

Pakistani troops targeted two posts with mortar fire in the southern Kashmiri district of Poonch late Thursday, to which the Indian army retaliated, defence sources said.

In the Samba region of Kashmir, 60 kilometres (38 miles) south of the Kashmiri winter capital Jammu, the Indian army fired mortar shells and damaged a Pakistani bunker.

Both sides exchanged small arms fire along several other points on the international border, the sources said.

Meanwhile, the number of soldiers killed in a suspected militant attack on an army convoy in Rajouri district on Thursday rose to four.

The soldiers were part of a "road opening party" which detects and clears explosive mines along the roads and highways in the region, he added.

In another incident, two Indian soldiers were injured in a blast in the southern district of Poonch on Friday when their vehicle ran over

an explosive device. Elsewhere in Kashmir, one Indian militant was killed when Indian army soldiers acting on a tip-off cordoned off a house.

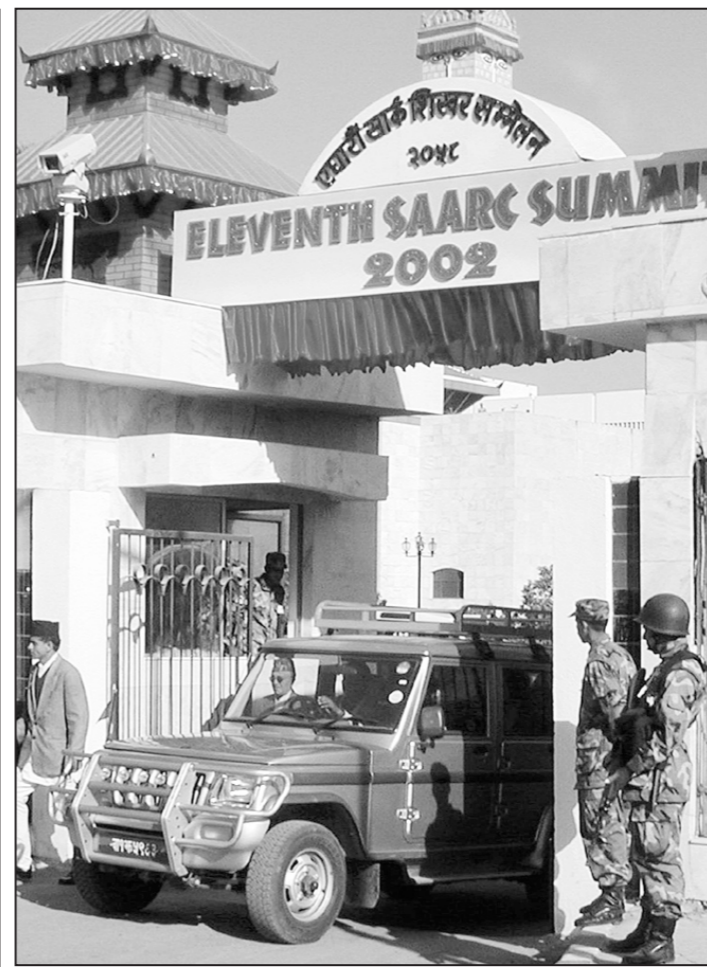
The militants inside the house opened fire on the soldiers and the encounter was still on, the sources said.

India and Pakistan have moved tens of thousands of troops to their border in recent weeks, following an increase in tension after the December 13 attack on India's parliament building in New Delhi.

India blamed the attack on two Pakistan-based Islamic militant groups who are battling New Delhi's rule in Indian-administered Kashmir.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf were to attend Friday the start of a summit of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Kathmandu.

India has ruled out any one-to-one dialogue between the two leaders during the summit, arguing that Pakistan must take further steps to crack down on Islamic militant groups before any formal bilateral dialogue can begin.



Nepali security officers stand guard as delegates leave the Birendra International Conference Center in Kathmandu on Friday after the inaugural session of the 11th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit was postponed by a day due to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's late arrival in Kathmandu.

### South Asian leaders meet

India rules out bilateral talks with Pakistan at the 11th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation summit

**On the agenda...**

- Anti-terrorism
- Signing of two conventions on preventing trafficking of women and children for prostitution, and promotion of child welfare

## Impact of summit on life of Kathmandu residents

AFP, Kathmandu

The long-delayed South Asia summit that begins in Nepal on Friday may be much anticipated by millions of people around the region, but weary Kathmandu residents will be happy for it to end.

While the 11th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit looks set to be dominated by tensions between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan, residents are facing more mundane problems.

Many people living on the outskirts of the capital had to spend Wednesday night with relatives in the city due to a ban on movement for buses and minibuses during the summit period.

"Life has become very difficult for commuters to move about due to absence of public transport," Babu Raja Shrestha said.

Since Monday vehicles have only been allowed to travel in Kathmandu every other day, depending on whether their license

plates end with even or odd numbers, in order to reduce congestion. Drivers complained that they had to take long detours to get to their destinations.

"We start from one place and then up on another and never get to our desired destination on time while we are driving or riding motorcycles," said one irate man who missed a medical appointment due to roadblocks.

"The traffic policemen stop us from going to our destinations whenever the foreign leaders come," Kathmandu resident Gyan Raj Tuladhar added.

"They prevent us from going anywhere or ask us to take a long detour. They block the roads for hours causing a great inconvenience to the general public."

"The nearly deserted streets of the capital city reminds me of the general strike days when almost all the vehicles were kept off the roads," Dilip Sharma, another resident of Kathmandu said.

## 'Terrorist level' reconfigures South Asian politics

AFP, Kathmandu

South Asian leaders are holding a summit in Kathmandu in a political atmosphere reordered by the September 11 attacks in the United States, in which most countries have found the label of terrorist a useful tool to quash longtime enemies.

With all seven members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) supporting the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan just beyond the regional bloc's borders, terrorism has become the operative buzzword for leaders wishing to win support for their causes, diplomats said.

"September 11 has revolutionised South Asia, putting attention on the region and to terrorism in it," said a Western diplomat monitoring the summit here.

"All the countries now see terrorism as an issue they have to address in common but also as a way to advance their causes," he added.

The terrorism focus has raised the temperature in the ever-confrontational relations between South Asia's largest countries, nuclear powers India and Pakistan, with New Delhi insisting that Islamabad crack down on anti-Indian "terrorists" before any bilateral dialogue is possible.

It has also transformed longstanding conflicts in Sri Lanka and Nepal, where insurgents have become

pariahs after being labelled terrorist outfits by the international community.

The Tamil Tigers, fighting to create a Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka, recently initiated a one-month truce with the new government after being labelled terrorists by Australia and Canada.

The United States, Britain and India had already blacklisted the Tigers, but the September 11 attacks "resulted in more world attention -- and more world disapproval -- of terrorism," the diplomat said.

In Nepal, Maoist rebels fighting to topple the constitutional monarchy since 1996 renounced a four-month ceasefire in November with a string of attacks on the military and police -- and have since been vilified by Kathmandu as terrorists.

"The government's declaration of the Maoists as terrorists in November was shrewd, as it won support for Nepal's position from around the world, particularly in India," the kingdom's key supplier of military equipment, the Western observer said.

Terrorism has also seen a resurgence in the lexicon of South Asian politics. Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia swept to power in October promising to tackle economic instability and crime -- referring to the latter as a struggle against terrorism.

## Troops kill 12 Maoist rebels in Nepal

AP, Kathmandu

Government troops shot and killed 12 Maoist rebels and lost two of their men during clashes in Nepal, a defence ministry spokesman said Friday.

The two soldiers were killed when they stepped on a land mine planted by suspected rebels in Myagdi, a village nearly 600 km northwest of Kathmandu, spokesman Bhola Silwal said.

Other soldiers also were wounded in Thursday's explosion, but their exact number was not immediately known.

Also on Thursday, five suspected rebels were killed in Gorkha, 120 km east of Kathmandu. Another seven rebels were killed in separate clashes with the army in midwest Nepal.

On Friday, the government asked hotels, hostels and even private homes to report to police about their guests for verification.

## Fiji drops charges against key figure in kidnap plot

AFP, Suva

Fiji authorities Friday dropped the charges against a key rebel arrested with three others for conspiring to kidnap the nation's leaders, after his wife alleged the whole thing was a set-up.

The charges were dropped against Varinava Tikou after his wife told the Daily Post she had a tape of her husband refusing to take part in the conspiracy.

Tikou was arrested along with three others on Thursday when police said they had foiled a plan to kidnap Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase and other leaders.

Police alleged Qarase, military head Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, and the others were to have been traded for jailed coup plotter George Speight, who is in custody on treason charges for the May 2000 coup.

## Lanka favours more S Asian meets to defuse tensions

AFP, Kathmandu

Sri Lanka, the outgoing head of the seven-member South Asian regional bloc, is urging member states to agree on more frequent political contacts to ease mounting regional tensions, officials said Friday.

Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the current chair of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), met with other leaders here Friday after the summit was abruptly put off until Saturday.

Kumaratunga, who has set a record as the longest serving head of SAARC by holding the post since July 1998, urged other leaders to have more regular political contacts, Sri Lanka's Foreign Secretary D. Wijesiri said.

The 11th SAARC summit was scheduled to take place in Nepal in November 1999 but was delayed because of bickering between India and Pakistan.

"The president has been saying that even if a summit cannot be held, there could be other meetings at ministerial level and at the level of officials," Wijesiri said.

He said Kumaratunga on Friday had one-to-one

meetings with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and the prime minister of Bhutan, Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk.

"The president also made the point that although important decisions were taken at the last summit in Colombo, they could not be implemented for lack of more frequent political contacts," Wijesiri said.

Kumaratunga is also setting another first for SAARC by leading a delegation that comprises members of a rival party. Her foreign minister, Tyrone Fernando, is a member of her parliament's ruling United National Party.

Kumaratunga's People's Alliance lost the December 5 parliamentary elections, but she remains as president and head of state until December 2005 as she was elected at a separate vote in 1999.

At the 1997 summit in the Maldivian capital Male, both Kumaratunga and Gayoom urged members to agree to "informal, off the record" meetings to reduce the bilateral tensions plaguing SAARC.

## Snowstorm kills 10 in US

AP, Raleigh

A potent mix of snowfall and deep freeze has wrapped the South in a dangerously icy cocoon, leaving at least 10 people dead from accidents on slick roads.

The storm has dumped about a foot of snow on parts of North Carolina, Virginia and Georgia. The snow was tapering off early Friday, but freezing temperatures including record lows in parts of Florida were expected to extend the misery into the weekend.

Hundreds of flights were cancelled at Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport, the nation's busiest. South Carolina's governor declared a state of emergency, called out the National Guard and told tens of thousands of state workers to take the rest of the week off.

The storm came as a shock to Southerners who were basking in 70-degree temperatures just a

couple of weeks ago. Daffodils, crocuses and cherry blossoms were tricked into believing spring had already arrived.

"What a change," said Susan Yeaman of the National Weather Service in Raleigh. "The weather pattern changed about a week ago, and it doesn't show any signs of changing back."

More than 2,400 accidents were reported in the Carolinas as the storm passed through.

In South Carolina, two women died when their cars skidded on ice and were struck by oncoming traffic. Three deaths were blamed on slick roads in Mississippi, as were two in suburban Atlanta, two in North Carolina and one in Virginia.

Thousands of passengers were stuck at the Atlanta airport on Thursday after the snow forced airlines to cancel about 600 flights. Some passengers had to wait for hours on airplanes as departing aircraft lined up to be decided.

## US pushes for truce as envoy meets Israel, PA leaders

### 1 killed in Israeli incursion

AFP, Jerusalem

US special envoy Anthony Zinni was demanding Friday swift steps towards a ceasefire between Israelis and Palestinians, even as Israeli troops posed a challenge to his mission by raiding a West Bank village on the hunt for Palestinian militants.

Zinni, who arrived here Thursday, was insisting the two sides put into immediate effect the US-sponsored Tenet accord, an agreement which serves as a bridge to a durable ceasefire and fresh peace negotiations. Israeli security officials said.

Zinni's stance risked causing a clash with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who is insisting on seven days of "complete calm" in the occupied territories before putting the Tenet plan into effect.

Zinni met Sharon at his ranch in southern Israel Friday morning, before going on to see Yasser Arafat in the West Bank town of Ramallah, where the Palestinian leader has been blockaded by the Israelis for the past month.

An Israeli official said Defence

Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres -- who is at odds with Sharon over how soon to begin implementing Tenet -- were also at the talks.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army backed by helicopters and tanks swooped into the northern West Bank village of Tel, in an autonomous Palestinian area near Nablus, on a search for militants.

An army spokesman said: "Our forces have been acting in the locality for several hours, searching for terrorists."

The spokesman said the area had been declared a "closed military zone" off limits to the press.

Meanwhile, an armed Palestinian was killed and three arrested by Israeli troops who raided the Palestinian village of Tel in the West Bank Friday in a search for militants, Israeli military sources said.

The man, armed with an M-16 assault rifle and wearing a bullet-proof vest, was killed when the troops came under fire, one source said.



Firemen from the NSW rural fire service monitor back-burning operations at Woodford in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney on Friday. Easier temperatures and winds today were used to prepare for predicted worsening conditions next week.

## No reprieve for firefighters

### Bushfires rage across New South Wales

AFP, Sydney

Australian firefighters were told Friday to prepare for another tough weekend with weather conditions expected to worsen across New South Wales.

Firefighters have been battling blazes which have destroyed half a million hectares (1,235,000 acres) of bushland across the state for 12 days and NSW Premier Bob Carr said dangerous combinations of high temperatures, wind and low humidity would keep more than 100 fires blazing.

"The current conditions will continue, but on Sunday they will get bad," Carr told reporters.

"This is, as we predicted, a long-term campaign," Rural Fire Services commissioner Phil Koperberg said.

"Over the next couple of days we'll see a gradual deterioration with a rather bad day being forecast for Sunday."

Firefighters faced fresh battles Friday to save homes in the Blue Mountains and at a string of holiday towns on the south coast. But containment lines appeared to be holding, and not a single house burned down.

But Koperberg refused to be complacent.

"We are at the mercy of a very unique weather pattern, the likes of which we've probably not seen for 40-odd years," he said.

The bushfires claimed their first serious casualty Friday when a firefighter had to be flown to hospital with burns.

Emergency services said the 47-year-old volunteer had suffered burns to his feet, legs and hands while battling a blaze in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney.

Koperberg said they hoped to have two more super helicopters from the United States in action at the beginning of next week.

Firefighters said a helitanker already on loan in Australia, nicknamed Elvis, rescued them from a wall of flames on Thursday when they were trapped by a fire in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney.

"The flames were crowning the treetops, it was a fireball, we were surrounded," fireman Chris Tierney, 20, said.

"Elvis saved us."

Elvis the helicopter hero, nicknamed because of its time serving with the US National Guard in Memphis, Tennessee, home of Elvis' mansion Graceland, can dump 9,000 litres (2,340 gallons) at a time on bushfires.