

US demands handover of Taliban freed by Kabul

Afghan troops asked to quit capital to make way for ISAF

AFP, Kabul

The United States has demanded the handover of top Taliban leaders who were released after surrendering to Afghan authorities, as it interrogates two suspected al-Qaida fighters captured in a raid on a cave complex.

The Taliban officials, including three former ministers and five other senior figures, were allowed to go free under a general amnesty after they turned themselves in to authorities in Kandahar province.

Provincial spokesman Khaled Pashtun said Tuesday the members of the defeated fundamentalist regime had surrendered over the past month since their stronghold in Kandahar city fell to opposition forces.

However, General Richard Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said information from the Taliban figures could help in the search for their leader Mullah Mohammad Omar and terror suspect Osama bin Laden.

"Obviously, individuals of that stature in the Taliban leadership are of great interest to the United States, and we would expect that they would be turned over, absolutely," he said.

"I can say that from the beginning what we want out of this is the al-Qaida leadership and the Taliban leadership and, of course, that would include bin Laden and that would include Omar," he said.

Myers said US forces in eastern Afghanistan seeking to wipe out the last of the Taliban, and the al-Qaida terror network it harboured, had captured a group of 14 al-Qaida fighters and detained two of them for interrogation.

They were captured late Monday as US forces swept an area around a former al-Qaida base in Pakitia province, revealing a huge network of caves and underground bunkers, he said in Washington.

Laptop computers, cell phones, small arms and training manuals found with them were being examined by intelligence experts, he said, while the two fighters were transferred to a US camp near Kandahar.

"They became very interesting to us because they're a part of the worldwide network of terrorism that al-Qaida supports," Myers said.

"And so, we would hope to be gleaming, you know, information that might point to future operations, other operatives and so forth."

Myers said US forces were now holding 364 al-Qaida and Taliban suspects in Afghanistan and on a US ship off the Gulf of Oman, some of whom would be transferred "soon" to a US naval base at Guantanamo, Cuba.

The multinational peacekeeping force for Afghanistan is steadily building up to its expected full force of 4,500 by the end of the month, with new arrivals nearly every day.

Meanwhile, Interior Minister Yunus Qanooni has ordered the Afghan military to quit Kabul within three days and leave security duties in the capital to Afghan police and an international peacekeeping force, his ministry said Wednesday.

The announcement came the day after Afghan officials said three top Taliban ministers had surrendered to the interim government of Hamid Karzai, but were allowed to go free under an amnesty agreement.

In Washington, the Pentagon said US forces were pursuing a sweep of the sprawling Zhawar Kilj complex, a former al-Qaida base in eastern Afghanistan, detaining two suspected senior al-Qaida fighters with cellphones and laptops.

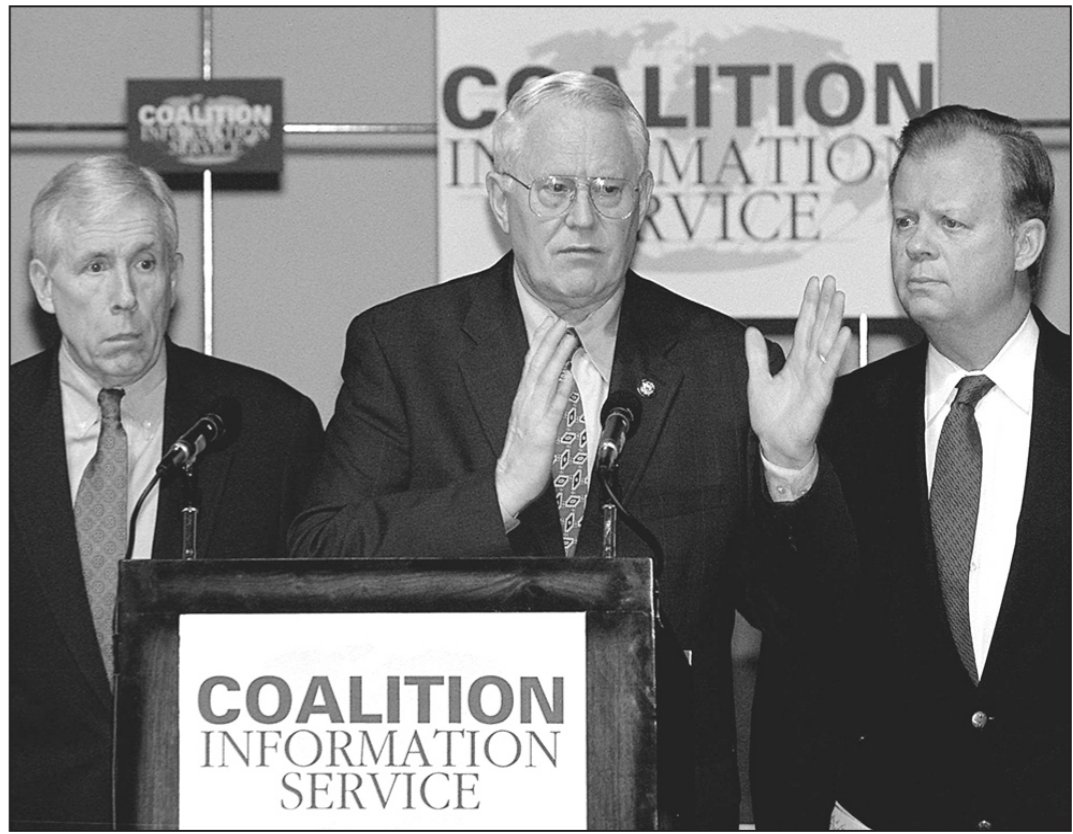
Universe formation looks like fireworks

AFP, Washington

Most of the stars that make up the universe were born, for the most part, just after the Big Bang, before the Earth, the Sun and the Milky Way galaxy were formed, a study presented here Tuesday concluded.

In flashes like fireworks in reverse, a great majority of the very first stars erupted, lighting the skies just a few hundred million years after the big bang, not in sporadic bursts like previously thought, said Kenneth Lanzetta of State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Based on data collected by the Hubble space telescope, "the very first stars may have burst into the universe as brilliantly and spectacularly as a fireworks finale -- except, in this case, the finale came first," he told reporters at NASA headquarters here.



US Congressman Joe Pitts (C) briefs newsmen along with his fellow congressmen Frank Wolf (L) and Tony Hall (R) in Islamabad on Wednesday. The three US congressmen returned to Pakistan after their two-day visit to Afghanistan after meeting with Afghan interim-leaders. The delegation head, congressman Wolf said Afghan leader Hamid Karzai should remain in government once the interim administration's six-month term ends to help rebuild the country.

China rules out mediation in Indo-Pak dispute

AFP, Beijing

China does not see itself in the role of peacemaker in the ongoing dispute between its two neighbours India and Pakistan, a ranking foreign ministry official said Wednesday.

China can mainly help bring about stability in the South Asia region through moral persuasion, trying to convince the two rivals to step down from the brink, said Fu Ying, director-general of the ministry's Asian Affairs department.

"In the end, I think it's up to India and Pakistan," she said at a briefing in Beijing. "A role can be played by China together with the whole international community to persuade the two sides to exercise control."

Australian bushfires tamed

AFP, Sydney

Australian authorities said Wednesday the worst of the bushfires that devastated more than half a million hectares of southeast Australian bushland were over, leaving firefighters to mop up smouldering containment lines.

"For now the peak is over," New South Wales (NSW) Rural Fire Service Commissioner Phil Koperberg said.

"A very significant mopping-up operation has begun. There are hundreds of kilometres (miles) of fire perimeter which have varying degrees of fire on them," he added.

"But given the enormous perimeter that remains still to be mopped up and given the fact that the meteorological advice is for no immediate rain, I couldn't really say the situation has stabilised to the point where we can write it off."

Iran accused of interfering in Afghan affairs

AFP, Kandahar

A spokesman for the governor of the Afghan city of Kandahar has accused Iran of interfering in the situation in Helmand and Herat provinces.

Khaled Pashtun, spokesman for Haji Gul Agha, who is governor of southern Kandahar province and also in charge of the neighbouring provinces of Helmand, Zabol and Uruzgan, said "senior Iranian officials" were interfering in the two provinces.

"In Uruzgan and Zabol (provinces), the situation is ok" even if there are "some local disturbances", but in southern Helmand "the situation is pretty bad, because of the Iranian interference," Khaled Pashtun told AFP on Tuesday.

Bush signs education reform into law

AFP, Hamilton

US President George W. Bush on Tuesday signed into law the most sweeping education reform bill in a generation, linking the fight to help poor students and raise school standards to the war on terrorism.

"We're going to win the war overseas, and we need to win the war against illiteracy here at home, as well," Bush told a rowdy crowd here before signing the "No Child Left Behind" initiative, one of his top domestic priorities.

Troops surround mosque with rebels in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Shooting broke out Wednesday as Indian troops in Kashmir ringed a mosque where one or more suspected militants were believed to be hiding, officials said.

Army soldiers backed by police counter-insurgency units had surrounded the mosque in Baramulla village in Baramulla district -- 40 kilometers (25 miles) northwest of Srinagar -- from early Wednesday morning.

"We called on the militants to give themselves up, and they

responded with gunfire," a senior district police official told AFP.

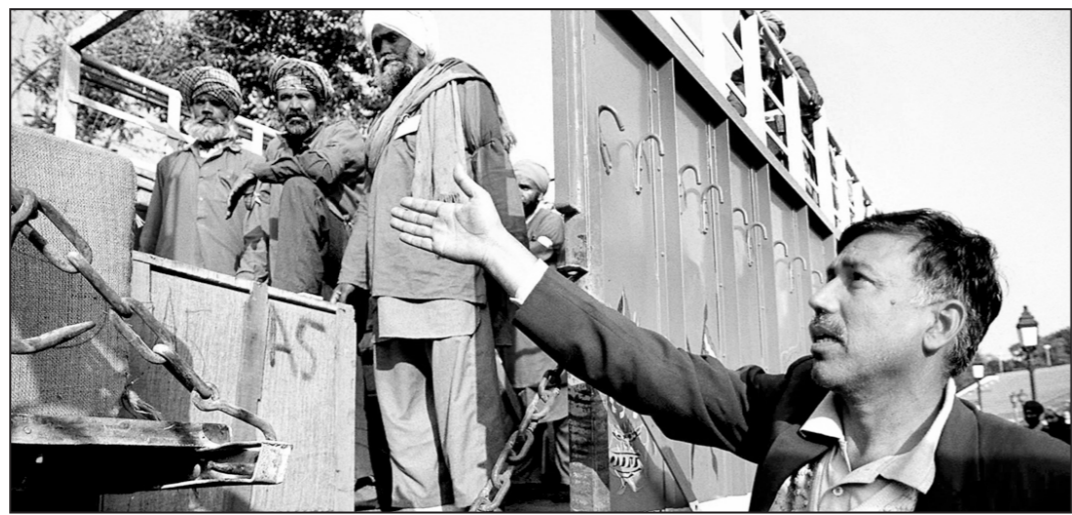
"The fire was returned and the encounter is continuing," the official said.

Mosque sieges present a problem for the Indian security forces who know that a straightforward assault could inflame local passions in the Muslim-majority state.

After a series of similar incidents, the Kashmir authorities warned last year they would "neutralise" any militants using mosques as a place of refuge during encounters with the security forces.

The warning came after six militants, holed up in a mosque in southern Kashmir, were killed on June 12 at the end of a 36-hour siege. One commando was killed and three injured in the final shootout.

On May 30, three Muslim militants who had barricaded themselves inside a mosque for more than 12 hours following a shootout with Indian security personnel were "allowed" to escape when the army withdrew a police cordon rather than launch an assault.



Raja Zafar Iqbal, a Pakistani diplomat to India directs porters while shifting his luggage from India to Pakistan at Wagah border, some 45 km from eastern city Lahore on Tuesday. Pakistan and India cut their high commission staff by 50 per cent. Military tensions between the two countries have been rising since India accused Pakistani intelligence of backing the December 13 attack on its parliament.

4 Israelis, 2 Palestinian raiders killed in attack on army post

AFP, Gaza City

Four Israeli soldiers, including an officer, and two Palestinian gunmen were killed Wednesday in an attack on a southern Israeli army post close to the Gaza Strip, shattering one of the calmest periods of the 15-month uprising and scuttling hopes for a swift truce accord.

The attack came as Israeli officials prepared to head to Washington with what Israel said is incontrovertible proof linking Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority to a major arms shipment intercepted in the Red Sea last week.

The clashes occurred beside Kerem Shalom kibbutz just inside southern Israel, close to the Gaza town of Rafah, Israeli and

Palestinian security said. They said the two Palestinians were wearing police uniforms but did not belong to the security services.

One of them was identified as a member of the radical Islamic group Hamas which declared last month it would adhere to Arafat's appeal for an end to attacks on Israel.

Israeli army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Olivier Rafowicz told AFP the Palestinian raiders had managed to break through the fence separating the Gaza Strip from Israel.

"They were spotted by soldiers in an army post. The two terrorists threw grenades and opened fire with automatic weapons toward our forces which returned fire,"

Rafowicz said. Government spokesman Avi Pazner said that the attack had however targeted the villagers of the kibbutz, or collective community, which was guarded by the army.

"I know who is responsible. The responsibility lies with the Palestinian Authority which has not done enough to prevent this," he said.

Rafowicz said: "This attack proves that the Palestinians are still following the path of violence, as was proved by the interception by Israeli commandos last week of a cargo of 50 tonnes of weapons from Iran destined for the Palestinian Authority."

Somalia asked to stop sheltering terrorists

AFP, Washington

The United States has warned several countries, especially Somalia, that they must deny safe haven to terrorists if they want to avoid becoming targets in the US war on terrorism, Secretary of State Colin Powell told The Washington Times.

"And one that immediately comes to mind and that has been mentioned particularly is Somalia," Powell said in an interview with editors and reporters of The Times published Wednesday.

He described Somalia as a "lawless place" that has a "past affiliation with such activity."

Terrorism tops Advani's talks agenda in US

AFP, Washington

India's Home Minister L.K. Advani meets top Bush administration officials Wednesday to ask for more US pressure on Pakistan, which New Delhi argues is doing little to crack down on terrorist groups.

Advani, India's number-two cabinet minister, will meet Secretary of State Colin Powell and Attorney General John Ashcroft, to discuss terrorism and a festering diplomatic crisis in South Asia, sparked by an attack on India's parliament last month.

A meeting with President George W. Bush may also occur, but was not confirmed late Tuesday. The president has in the past conducted unofficial but highly symbolic "drop-

by" meetings with visiting Indian dignitaries.

Ahead of the talks, there are signs that Washington's frequent public praise for Musharraf's crackdown on militants is not shared by India, which blames two militant groups and the Pakistani intelligence service for the December 13 attack.

Pakistani security forces have rounded up scores of militants, branded by India as terrorists, but India on Tuesday insisted it was still waiting for Pakistan to take "substantive" steps.

Advani's visit marks the launch of an international diplomatic offensive by India, designed to push its case against Pakistan.

'Musharraf taking steps to defuse Indo-Pak tension'

AP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf is close to unveiling a "bold and principled" initiative aimed at easing the threat of war with fellow nuclear power India linked to the disputed region of Kashmir, US senators said Tuesday.

Speaking after meeting the Pakistani leader near the end of their tour of the region, the nine-member delegation also said the United States was prepared for a long-term commitment to the region as part of its global anti-terror campaign.

Musharraf has publicly renounced terrorism and banned two radical Muslim groups involved in sectarian killings in Pakistan, as well as shut down the offices of two anti-India groups in efforts to ease tensions. More than 300 anti-Indian activists have been arrested over the past two weeks.

But hostilities continued on the border Tuesday. Indian authorities said three suspected Islamic militants attacked an army camp in Indian-ruled Kashmir with guns and grenades, killing one soldier.

US targets immigrants of ME nations in crackdown

AFP, Washington

About 6,000 men of Middle Eastern origin are expected to be the focus of a US government crackdown on illegal aliens refusing to comply with deportation orders, law enforcement sources said.

The hunt will be part of an earlier announced campaign to find and apprehend more than 300,000 individuals who have ignored deportation orders issued by immigration authorities and went into hiding.

Late last year, Immigration and Naturalization Service Commissioner James Ziglar announced that the fugitives' names would be entered into the Federal Bureau of Investigation's main database, the National Crime Information Center, which was expected to greatly increase the chance of their apprehension.

But on Tuesday, law enforcement officials made clear the crackdown on the fugitives will have a distinct anti-terrorist bias and focus first and foremost on individuals who come from regions where known terrorist groups operate.

"The Department of Justice's highest priority, which is preventing terrorists from killing more innocent Americans, is reflected throughout our enforcement operations," said a department official when asked to comment on the government's plans regarding fugitives from deportation.

Tigers eye India as peace talks venue

REUTERS, Colombo

A Norwegian team was set to arrive in Sri Lanka today to push forward the country's nascent peace process amid reports that separatist Tamil Tiger rebels wanted talks held in neighbouring India.

The Norwegians, led by Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen, were expected to meet President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe after meeting Anton Balasingham, the spokesman and chief negotiator for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in London last week.

The arrival of the Norwegians, asked by both sides to help facilitate the peace process, comes amid renewed hopes for peace after the Tigers and Wickremesinghe's government -- elected last month on

a pro-peace mandate both declared ceasefire from Christmas Eve.

A London-based newspaper seen close to LTTE said the rebels wanted the talks in India, which has outlawed the group, because it would allow negotiators on both sides to easily consult leaders in Colombo and in Sri Lanka's rebel-held northern Wanni region.

"With Sri Lankan territory deemed unsuitable given the inherent security concerns... South India was an ideal location," the Tamil Guardian newspaper said in its Wednesday's issue.

An editorial in the newspaper said: "The provision of a venue for talks in the context of the Norwegian peace initiative would be a significant contribution to (its) success."

Blair's battle at home front

AP, London

In the past week, Prime Minister Tony Blair has helped ease tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan and paid a risky midnight visit to the new leaders of Afghanistan.

That was the easy part.

As he returned home Tuesday, the leader dubbed "the second-most powerful man in the world" by a major Indian newspaper was accused of walking the world stage while ignoring crippling domestic problems, including a failing railway network and an overstretched health-care system.

"Britain is a country with a long tradition of international involvement -- but there are also pressing issues within the UK that require the same level of commitment," said Tony Travers, director of the Greater London group at the London School of Economics.

"The railways, particularly the suburban railways in London are squalid," he said in an interview.

Blair had made improving Britain's ailing public services -- especially the reviled railways and the once-proud National Health Service -- a centerpiece of his re-election campaign last spring.

Then came September 11.

After the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, Blair became an energetic advocate of the international war on terrorism, working closely with US President George W. Bush and traversing the Middle East to drum up support for the campaign in Afghanistan.

Britain also was the first country to commit troops and forces to the US-led attacks that drove out the hard-line

Taliban government.

These activities have increased Blair's international stature, but his absence from the home front has boosted the opposition Conservative Party, which has struggled since losing power in 1997 to dent the widespread popularity of Blair's Labor Party government.

While Blair visited the subcontinent, commuters in southern England endured four days of strikes by train workers. Newspaper, and the Conservatives, informed the public that Transport Secretary Stephen Byers also was in India at the time -- on vacation.

"Tony Blair must realize that his first obligation is to the British people and concentrate on the domestic agenda," said Conservative chairman David Davis.

Speaking for the party, he said Blair "can ill afford to relinquish the time for foreign travel when he is so badly needed to solve the problems his government created at home."

The prime minister's office dismissed the criticism, pointing out that Blair has spent only two weeks on foreign trips in the four months since September 11.

Blair "has made it very clear that reform of public services is the No. 1 priority, and the government will be judged on its performance," said a Downing Street spokesman, on customary condition of anonymity.

Despite the promises, patients still often wait months for surgery in public-sector hospitals, and the overcrowded, inefficient rail network has become a painful national joke.



Philippine President Gloria Arroyo (R) walks with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi after the welcoming ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Manila on Wednesday. Manila is the start of the Prime Minister Koizumi's weeklong campaign for more vigorous relations with southeast Asia, that will also take him to Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand.