

New prisoners reach Cuban base as US bombing goes on

AFP, Kabul

A second group of 30 captured Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters arrived in Cuba as US bombers continued pounding a former militant base ahead of a visit by US Secretary of State Colin Powell to Afghanistan.

Powell's visit is intended to support reconstruction of the nation shattered by two decades of war, but the interim government and aid organisations said their work was being frustrated by a lack of funds.

The first group of 20 prisoners from Afghanistan arrived at the base Friday in shackles and chains and with two guards for each prisoner -- the same safety precautions accorded the second group on their arrival Monday.

Attack on Zimbabwe's opposition legislator

AFP, Harare

An opposition legislator was abducted, knifed and left for dead by suspected ruling party supporters, amid mounting political violence here, the privately-owned Daily News reported Tuesday.

State television also reported the attack late Monday, and said David Mpala, who is the Movement for Democratic Change's (MDC's) MP for Lupane, in southwestern Zimbabwe, was in a stable condition.

The Daily News reported that Mpala was abducted from Lupane business centre on Sunday afternoon. His kidnapers drove Mpala away in his own vehicle before dumping him on the side of a road with a deep gash in his abdomen.

Danish queen celebrates scandal-free 30 yrs on throne

AFP, Copenhagen

Denmark's Queen Margrethe II has just celebrated 30 years on the throne of the small Scandinavian country, enjoying a popularity that was never tainted by scandal or criticism.

The anniversary on Monday was celebrated by neither the court nor the government, and passed unnoticed in a country that adores its royals.

"Normally, we do not celebrate a 30th anniversary," said Per Thornit, palace spokesman, adding that Margrethe had carried out her normal functions on Monday, by granting a public audience.

He added that the Danish royal house does roll out the red carpet for 25th and 50th anniversaries.

It was on a freezing morning -- January 14, 1972 -- that Margrethe Alexandrine Thorildur Ingrid was proclaimed sovereign of the 1,000-year-old monarchy, the oldest in the world.

More than 100,000 Danes braved the cold to stand in the square outside the Christiansborg castle to salute the tearful new queen, dressed in black, as she succeeded her father, Frederik IX, who had died the previous day.

51 dead or missing in Chinese mine blasts

AFP, Beijing

At least 51 miners were reported dead or missing in three mine blasts in the Chinese provinces of Hunan, Jiangxi and Yunnan, state press reported Tuesday.

Twenty-five miners were confirmed dead and 10 injured when a gas explosion tore up an unlicensed coal pit in Wenshan county, in southwestern China's Yunnan province Monday, Xinhua news agency said.

All 35 miners were working underground when the blast occurred, provincial mining officials said.

Floods bring chaos in Jakarta

AP, Jakarta

Flooding brought chaos to much of Indonesia's capital Jakarta on Tuesday, partially blocking the toll road to its international airport and forcing thousands to flee their homes.

Knee-deep waters meant taxis and automobiles were unable to pass a short section of the turnpike linking the city of Soekarno-Hatta International airport.

Travelers were transferred to buses and trucks high enough to forage the waters, causing delays to scores of flights, said Haryadi, spokesman for toll road operators PT Jasa Marga.



Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji (L) shakes hand with Leader of Opposition in Indian Parliament, Sonia Gandhi (R) before a meeting in New Delhi on Tuesday. China and India called for a new era of understanding during the highest-level Chinese visit in India in a decade, with the two sides pledging to expand trade in the backdrop of high tensions between India and Beijing's ally Pakistan.

US congressmen call for Indo-Pak negotiation

AFP, Islamabad

US Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle on Tuesday lavished praise on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and called for New Delhi to open dialogue with Islamabad over Kashmir.

Leading a delegation of congressmen on a visit to Pakistan, Daschle told a press briefing that only dialogue could reduce the threat of war between India and Pakistan over the divided Muslim-majority region.

He said Musharraf's landmark speech on Saturday, in which the president banned five Islamic militant groups and pledged to rein in religious extremists, was a watershed in the history of Pakistan.

"I felt it was one of the most powerful, most meaningful speeches we have heard from a leader in this region for a long, long time," the senator from South

Dakota said. "We are very grateful for the reforms he has announced and for his determination to rid the region of terrorism in all its shapes..."

But India has cast doubt on Musharraf's sincerity and refused to stand down its army, which has been poised for war since the December 13 attack on its parliament by Islamic rebels allegedly based in Pakistan.

Daschle said US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who is due to arrive in Islamabad on Wednesday, would call on both sides to reduce tensions and start talks.

His comments matched Musharraf's repeated calls for talks with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to defuse the crisis, a suggestion dismissed by New Delhi.

"I think there is a new opportunity for dialogue... we need to capture this opportunity and take advantage," Daschle said.

He said Musharraf had reiterated his plea for Washington to play a greater role in finding a solution to the festering 55-year-old row between the South Asian rivals over the Himalayan state of Kashmir.

The senator said Powell's message to Vajpayee and the Indian leadership would focus on the need for a peaceful resolution to the dispute.

"The message has to be dialogue. The message has to be reducing tensions," he said.

Since independence in 1947, India and Pakistan have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir, where a Muslim separatist insurgency against Indian rule has raged since 1989.

Daschle also thanked Pakistan for its support for the US-led war against terrorism and promised a review of trade relations and other bilateral contacts, including military cooperation.

Senator calls for reviewing US policy toward Muslims

AFP, Washington

A key Democratic senator has urged the administration of President George W. Bush to reassess US policy toward the Muslim world to prevent Islamic radicals from building what he termed an "ideological iron curtain."

In a major foreign policy speech at Georgetown University Monday, Senator Joseph Lieberman accused "the fanatical forces of jihad" of trying to build "a theological iron curtain to divide the Muslim world from the rest of the globe."

He said this new "Berlin Wall" is

being built "with bricks made from poverty and tyranny, cemented by the mortar of hatred and violence."

The Connecticut lawmaker, who ran for vice president in the 2000 presidential election and is seen as possible presidential contender in 2004, urged the administration to broaden its interaction with the Muslim world.

"We must act now, proactively and aggressively, to help the millions of modern Muslims in the world who are being besieged by isolation and intolerance, because if the curtain should some day fall, it would constitute a great and grave

danger to our country and much of the rest of world," said Lieberman.

The senator, just back from a trip to Central Asia, said the United States must be more assertive in defending democracy, human rights and freedom of the press in Muslim countries.

"We must make those values a premise of our alliances and a condition of our aid, because the inalienable God-given rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that we declared our independence for don't end at America's borders," Lieberman pointed out.

Ban on LTTE-held areas eased amid truce hopes

AFP, Piramanalankulam Checkpoint

Sri Lankan troops manning this frontier post Tuesday eased an economic embargo on areas held by Tamil Tiger guerrillas which the army chief said he hoped would help ensure a lasting truce.

Hundreds of heavily armed soldiers allowed trucks to cross the front lines, carrying commodities and merchandise earlier banned from territory controlled by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north and east of the island.

"We are easing the restrictions as the government wants to improve the conditions in the 'uncleared' areas (held by the rebels) and build confidence," army chief Lieutenant General Lionel Balagalle told

AFP as the first trucks crossed the front lines Tuesday morning.

Balagalle said the easing of the embargo, as well as allowing more civilians to go through the rebel lines, was not considered a threat to the security of areas held by the military south of the checkpoint.

The checkpoint is the main entry and exit point for civilians as well as for commodities. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) "facilitates" movement through a "no-man's land" of a short strip of dirt road.

The government announced earlier this month that it would relax the embargo -- first imposed in the late 1980s.

Pakistan to seek US help in easing tensions with India

India rules out any third party mediation

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan will seek US help to mediate with rival India over tensions which have brought the nuclear rivals to the brink of war when Secretary of State Colin Powell visits Islamabad, officials said Tuesday.

Powell is due to arrive here Wednesday for talks with President Pervez Musharraf and Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar, before going on to visit Afghanistan and India.

"Pakistan views the tour as a major opportunity to press for opening of a dialogue process between India and Pakistan," a foreign ministry official told AFP.

"Certainly Pakistan would be hoping the US would use its influence over New Delhi to de-escalate the tensions on the borders and bring India to the negotiating table for resolving all outstanding issues including the core issue of Kashmir."

However, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes, who was due to leave on an official visit to the United States later Tuesday, ruled out any role for Washington as a mediator or a facilitator for talks between New Delhi and Islamabad.

India has stuck publicly to its policy that disputes should be resolved bilaterally without third-party interference.

India on Monday ruled out pulling back its forces from the border, despite the landmark weekend address by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in which he outlawed five militant organisations, including two accused by New Delhi of being behind the December 13 attack on its parliament that left 14 dead.

The attack on parliament sparked a massive troop build-up, tit-for-tat

sanctions and war of words between the South Asian rivals.

Pakistan has initiated a sweeping crack-down which has already netted some 1,400 alleged religious extremists but Fernandes said Monday it was still too early to tell whether Musharraf would match his words with deeds.

But ahead of his departure from Washington on Tuesday, Powell said Pakistan -- a crucial ally in the US-led campaign in Afghanistan -- had already gone beyond mere rhetoric.

"President Musharraf has done more than just speak, he is taking action, he has banned terrorist organisations, he is arresting people," Powell said in a CNN interview on the eve of his departure.

He later said a key aim of the mission would be to downgrade the chances of a sudden incident triggering a new Indo-Pakistan war.

"There are a million troops, if that is the right count, facing each other, and that always has to be seen as a dangerous situation," he told Fox News in another of a string of pre-departure interviews.

"We are trying to find a way to make sure that no spark ignites a conflagration between those two forces."

"We do not want, and cannot have a war in South Asia at this time."

US President George W. Bush, who spoke Sunday with both Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, was watching the situation closely, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

"The situation remains one of concern, and the president will continue to monitor it and stay fully engaged," Fleischer told reporters aboard Air Force One Monday.

Pakistan analysts said US involvement in trying to settle the festering issue of the divided Kashmir region was vital.

US troops in Manila mission to crush Laden allies

AFP, Manila

A risky joint military training exercise involving hundreds of US soldiers got off to a low-key start Tuesday in the southern Philippines, where the Americans could figure in combat with local allies of Osama bin Laden.

US and Filipino military coordinators met in the southern city of Zamboanga to launch the first of three stages of exercises that could include live-fire operations against the Abu Sayyaf, Muslim gunmen holding hostage an American couple in the nearby southern island of Basilan.

Arriving in batches starting next week, the bulk of up to 690 US soldiers would join local troops in the operations as "observers" but will be armed and allowed to return fire if attacked, officials say.

US soldiers are aware of the risks and "if they sustain casualties, they have already factored that in their planning," military spokesman Brigadier General Edilberto Adan said.

The exercises, renamed "Kalayaan-Aguila 2002" (Freedom-Eagle 2002), will last at least six months and are believed to be the

first of their kind since the US-led military campaign against bin Laden and his Taliban hosts in Afghanistan.

Apart from the US troops that figure in annual joint war games in the Philippines, the troops will also be the first deployments of US ground forces in this southeast Asian archipelago since tens of thousands of US servicemen vacated Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Base north of Manila in 1992.

The manoeuvres involve "preparation, training and deployment" in Basilan and other areas, said Brigadier General Emmanuel Teodosio, the training director for the 1,200 Filipino troops taking part in the exercises.

"I emphasise the presence of the Americans is to train, advise and assist our troops and military, but they can defend themselves if attacked by enemy groups," Teodosio told reporters after the Zamboanga meeting.

"We do not want to subject them to unnecessary risks, but they will be in the battlefield."

US asks Israel to defer arms sale to India

REUTERS, Washington

The Bush administration has urged Israel to defer selling weapons technology to India in light of the current crisis with Pakistan, a senior US official said on Monday.

He told Reuters the message was delivered to Israeli officials last week and "I think Israel is listening."

"There are some military sales questions that the Israelis have raised that posed problems for us and we've told them about that," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"These are sales they want to make to the Indians where we've basically said this is not the right time to be selling to either side anything, frankly," he said. "We've made it very clear to them. This is not the time to do it."

After the establishment of full diplomatic ties in 1992, the two countries bled in part by concerns Islamic extremism have strengthened defense cooperation, with India buying sophisticated defense equipment from Israel.

The senior US official said one are of American concern involves

the Arrow-2 anti-tactical ballistic missile defense system, a joint US-Israeli project for which Washington provided a majority of the development funding.

The Israelis "have talked (with the Indians) about a number of things. Some they have sold and some they haven't. The Arrow anti-missile system is one," the official said.

Among other concerns, he said, the Arrow sale may violate the Missile Technology Control Regime, an information international agreement aimed at preventing the spread of most missiles to unstable regions.

"Other sales they (Israelis) want to make don't involve that but do involve the question of why anybody would sell anything either to the Indians or the Pakistanis other than chewing gum," the official said.

The United States in 2001 led Israel to believe that it would not oppose Israel's proposed sale of three Phalcon airborne warning and control system (AWACS) planes to India, said an Israeli official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.



Krishna Nandi (L), the wife of shooting victim Krishna Nandi, and her mother-in-law Minu Nandi (R) grieve in Singicherra village, 50 km from state capital Agartala on Monday. Seventeen Bangalis were shot dead when the outlawed NLFT rebels opened fire in a crowded market in Tripura.

Israel back on alert after fresh killing

AFP, Jerusalem

After weeks of relative calm, Israel was on high alert Tuesday, a day after an offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement killed an Israeli soldier in revenge for the slaying of one of its most wanted leaders.

The sudden outbursts of violence, which Palestinian officials said marked Israel's return to a policy of targeted assassinations, came as Washington expressed increasing frustration with both the Palestinians and Israelis.

A commander of the Israel border guards units, Israel Yitzhak, told army radio his forces were on alert after the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a radical Fatah splinter group, killed a soldier and wounded another near the West Bank town of Nablus late Monday.

The group, which had said it would respect Arafat's call a month ago for a ceasefire, said Israel had "opened the doors of hell" by killing Raek al-Karmi in an explosion in the northeastern West Bank town of Tulkarem.

Colombian govt, rebels to resume peace talks

AP, Los Pozos

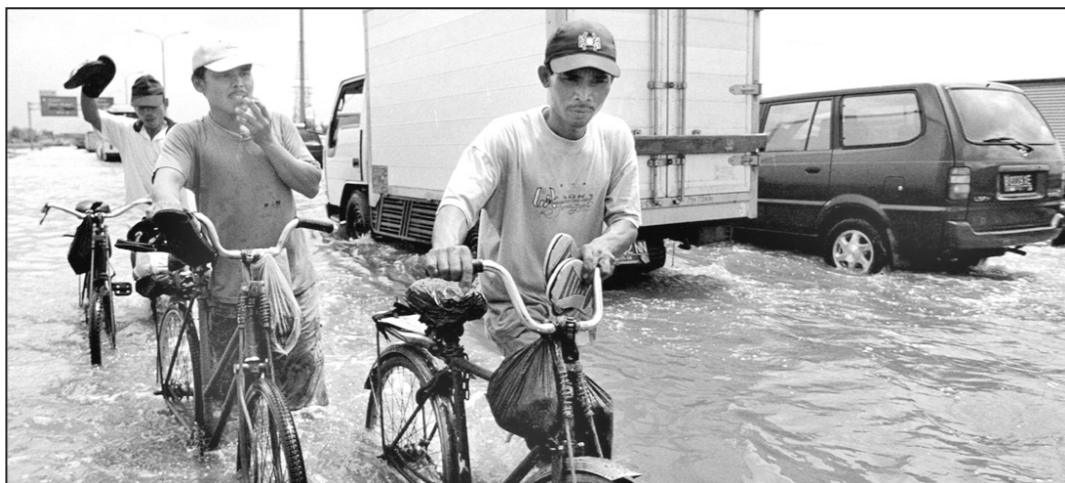
Colombia's government and the main leftist rebel group have agreed to resume peace talks, pulling back from the brink of a wider war after last-ditch mediation by UN and international envoys.

"The peace process continues," a triumphant President Andres Pastrana told a national television audience Monday.

Hours earlier, capping a day of talks in this rebel-held southern village, France's Ambassador to Colombia, Daniel Parfait, read a statement declaring that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, had dropped its objections to returning to peace talks, paralyzed since October.

The government had set a deadline of 9:30 pm (0230 GMT Tuesday) for rebels to agree to resume the peace process or lose a large safe haven where three years of plodding peace talks have been held.

Elite counterinsurgency troops backed by tanks, warplanes and helicopters had been massing around the zone for days in Colombia's steamy southern plains, awaiting orders to move into the zone. Many feared a major escalation in the 38-year war should the peace talks fail.



People wade through a flood area of the main road to Jakarta's International airport on Tuesday. Floods hit several parts of the Indonesian capital and partly blocked the main road to the airport.