

Donors pledge \$ 3 billion for Afghans

AFP, Tokyo

World leaders Monday pledged more than three billion dollars at an international conference here to help pull Afghanistan out of the dark years of rubble, famine and misery.

Interim Afghan leader Hamid Karzai, seeking to rebuild his country from scratch after two decades of war and the misrule of the Taliban, issued an emotional appeal for help to delegates from more than 50 countries.

"I'm here as the citizen of a country that has had nothing but disasters, war, brutality and deprivation for so many years," he said at the start of the two-day gathering in Tokyo.

"Please recognise that what you see here is not what you see in Afghanistan," he told delegates including US Secretary of State Colin Powell and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

"We are nicely dressed, we have eaten a good breakfast this morning... but ladies and gentlemen remember that there are in Afghanistan millions of people who are unable to go to basic school, find a treatment for some minor illness, forced to travel with relatives on incredibly bad roads... and that many people are not well fed because of drought and war."

Karzai also urged the world to forgive debts run up by Afghanistan's previous regimes, including the Taliban before the fundamentalist militia's forced departure last month, to boost his cash-starved administration.

The gathering was first mooted by the Japanese government a month after the September 11 attacks on

the United States, as US-led forces began bombarding the Taliban in a campaign that led to Karzai taking over last month.

In a bid to stop Afghanistan lurching back to the post-Soviet chaos that turned it into a breeding ground for extremism and a safe haven for the al-Qaida network of chief terror suspect Osama bin Laden, donors promised to give a total of 3.083 billion dollars over the next five years.

The final figure for 2002 alone looked set to match or beat the 1.3 billion dollars that, according to Annan, Afghanistan needs "right now to cover its immediate needs".

"But the true test, of course, is... whether we will make good on those pledges, whether we provide the aid that is desperately needed right now, and whether we stay engaged for the long haul," the UN chief added.

Despite the ringing declarations of support, the pledges must yet be turned into hard cash. Afghans will be wary of the international community losing sight of their crippling problems as the collective gaze shifts elsewhere in the months and years ahead.

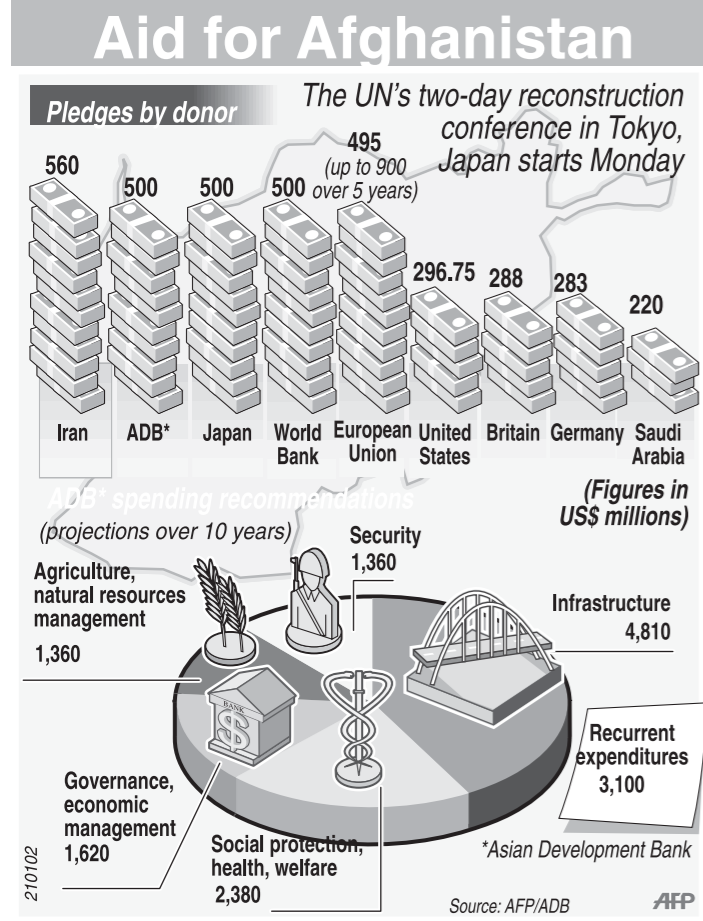
Powell assured Karzai and his delegation that "the American people are with you in the long-term," as he announced Washington's contribution of 296.75 million dollars in the coming year.

"The United States will not abandon the people of Afghanistan and we in the international community must not fail them," Powell said.

Conference hosts Japan pledged 250 million dollars this year and up to 500 million dollars over the next two and a half years.



Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (L) shakes hands with Interim Afghan leader Hamid Karzai (C) during the two-day International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan at a Tokyo hotel on Monday, while US Secretary of State Colin Powell (R) looks on. Karzai urged international donors to take action rather than make pledges to help his war-torn country, and asked them to write off its debts.



Chinese terrorists get arms, money from Laden!

AP, Beijing

China stepped up efforts yesterday to win acceptance of its fight with Muslim separatists in its northwest, issuing a report accusing one group of being part of Osama bin Laden's terror network and of getting weapons and money from him.

The report was the most explicit Chinese claim yet linking bin Laden and separatists in the northwestern Muslim region of Xinjiang, also known as East Turkestan. It singled out the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which it said coordinated action with bin Laden and sent him fighters for training.

"The East Turkestan terrorist organization... has the unstinting support of bin Laden, and is an important part of his terrorist forces," said the report issued by the press office of China's cabinet.

The report didn't offer any evidence to support its claims.

'Iraq has robbed US of pretext for attack'

AFP, Baghdad

By demonstrating "flexibility and wisdom" during the Arab League chief's recent visit, Baghdad has robbed the United States of any pretext to attack Iraq, an Iraqi newspaper said Monday.

"Given the combination of flexibility and wisdom shown by Iraq's leadership... there is no longer any justification for the Bush administration's threats against our country," said Babel, which is run by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's elder son Uday.

The newspaper was referring to messages which Saddam asked Arab League Secretary General Amr Mussa during a meeting on Saturday to convey to UN chief Kofi Annan and Arab leaders.

RSS leader blames Church for backing rebels

AFP, Guwahati

The leader of India's most powerful Hindu nationalist group, the RSS, accused Church leaders on Monday of aiding and abetting separatist rebels in the northeast of the country.

"The Baptist churches in particular are providing arms and other logistic support to various insurgent outfits in the northeastern states," said K.S. Sudershan, president of the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Corps).

Speaking to a gathering of RSS workers from all seven northeastern states in Guwahati, capital of Assam state, Sudershan said the churches were "fueling secessionist tendencies" among the youth in the region.

34 new detainees arrive at Guantanamo

REUTERS, Guantanamo Bay

Thirty-four more Taliban and al Qaida prisoners arrived at the US Navy Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba on Sunday, bringing the total number of detainees at the facility to 144.

The men were processed into the facility, part of which was witnessed by delegates from the International Committee of the Red Cross, according to Marine Maj. Steve Cox.

Two of the arrivals were sedated during the flight after shouting and thrashing about, Cox said. All were

Taiwan's president picks new PM to lead 'combat cabinet'

AP, Taipei

Taiwan's president picked a new premier yesterday to lead a reshuffled Cabinet that will help him face what's expected to be the most crucial period of his presidency.

The leadership change promoted presidential aide Yu Shyi-kun to premier, the island's No. 3 ranking leader. Hours after the announcement, Yu appointed new ministers for defense and foreign affairs.

Yu replaced Chang Chun-hsiung, who for more than a year struggled with an opposition-controlled legislature and an economy that slipped into recession for the first time in decades.

The premier's main job is managing the Cabinet and defending the government's policy proposals in the unruly legislature. Although the premier ranks behind the vice president, the premier's job has a higher profile and is arguably more important.

Taiwan's volatile stock market applauded the new premier, closing about 5 per cent higher on new hopes he would improve the economy, dealers said.

President Chen Shui-bian's term ends in 2004, and his re-election will greatly depend on his new premier and Cabinet's performance. Chen has nicknamed his new team the "combat Cabinet" and has pledged it will smooth relations with the legislature and improve the economy.

"Let's bring an end to the harsh confrontation and political squabbling and give the people a break," Chen told reporters.

The president praised the portly Chang, a former lawmaker and lawyer for dissidents during Taiwan's martial law era for playing an "irreplaceable role" during the "difficult and pivotal" first year of his presidency.

But the president told reporters that he needed a fresh team to deal

with a newly elected legislature and that Yu was the man for the job. He praised the 53-year-old Yu who has served as the president's secretary-general for overcoming a childhood on an impoverished farm and achieving success through toughness and persistence.

"Yu has an unassuming personality that doesn't seek controversy," Chen said. "He has the ability to break through conflict and mediate."

Yu's skills as a mediator will be tested in the legislature. Although the president's Democratic Progressive Party became the legislature's biggest party after last month's elections, the DPP does not have a majority in the lawmaking body.

Before the legislative elections, Chen pledged that he would create a coalition government. But the opposition has refused to cooperate.

India, Pakistan still far from military de-escalation

Delhi welcomes Pak 'wanted' list

AFP, New Delhi

Any military de-escalation on the tense Indo-Pakistan border looks set to be a painfully slow process, with neither side willing to be identified as the loser in a game of brinkmanship that has taken them to the edge of war. Despite statements from US Secretary of State Colin Powell that the stand-off between the South Asian nuclear rivals had eased in the past week, India and Pakistan have continued to indulge in belligerent rhetoric with no sign of any immediate border troop reductions.

Powell concluded a peace mission to Pakistan and India on Friday, saying the two countries seemed ready to find a way out of the current crisis triggered by last month's attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi.

"Based on my conversations in both Islamabad and in New Delhi, I think things have improved a little bit in the last week," Powell told

Fox News Sunday in a pre-recorded interview from Tokyo on Sunday.

"I'm encouraged that both President (Pervez) Musharraf and Prime Minister (Atal Behari) Vajpayee are committed to finding a political and diplomatic solution."

But Powell stressed that the situation remained tense on the border, where both sides have massed an estimated 800,000 troops.

"I don't want to minimise the dangerous nature of the situation. Until we get things back to normal and we can de-escalate, we have to be concerned," Powell said.

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said Monday that New Delhi wanted Pakistan pledges to crack down on extremist groups translated into action and added that it would welcome and act on any list that Islamabad may provide of Pakistani criminals sheltering in India.

Praising measures announced more than week ago by Musharraf to curb extremist

groups, Singh said his words had to be followed with action.

"We want it translated into action of the ground," Singh said, citing Indian demands for the extradition of 20 wanted criminals and "terrorists" allegedly sheltering in Pakistan.

"The 20 is a list of some of the most heinous criminals," Singh said, adding that 15 of those on the list handed to Islamabad several weeks ago were the subjects of "red alert" Interpol notices.

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From left to right: Fa Femina Miss India - Earth Reshmi Ghosh, Fa Femina Miss India - Universe Neha Dhupia and Fa Femina Miss India - World Shrutti Sharma pose for photographers during a press conference in New Delhi on Monday. The three beauties were crowned in Hyderabad on Saturday and will contest in the international Miss Earth, Miss World and Miss Universe Pageants later this year. Despite strong opposition from women's groups and extremist Hindus, female beauty pageants have bloomed and are now big business in India.

Lankan peace gets a boost as both sides extend truce

AFP, Colombo

Norway's attempts to broker peace in Sri Lanka received a fresh boost Monday as the antagonists agreed to hold their fire for another month to clear the way for talks.

The Norwegian government said Monday that Sri Lanka's new Prime Minister Ranil

Wickremesinghe informed Oslo of Colombo's decision to extend its truce by a further month until February 24, reciprocating a move by the Tamil Tiger rebels.

Sri Lanka's action was to "provide Norway time to facilitate a mutually agreed cease-fire between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of

Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," the Norwegian foreign ministry said.

It came a day after the Tigers announced that the ceasefire, which was due to expire on Thursday, was being extended until February 24 as Oslo tried to bring them and the Sri Lankan government to the negotiating table.

US war on terror bringing democracy back to Pakistan: Benazir

AFP, Dubai

The US-led war in Afghanistan is bringing democracy back to Pakistan regardless of the military rulers, former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto said Monday.

"The crackdown against militants in Afghanistan heralds the approach of a new era," Benazir said in an article for Gulf News.

"That new era is now forcing itself on Islamabad irrespective of whether the rulers are ready for it."

Democratic principles promoted by Washington, London and New Delhi mark out the new era, according to Benazir, prime minister from 1988-1990 and 1993-1996 when her Pakistan People's Party government was dismissed on corruption charges.

She reviewed General Pervez Musharraf's declaration of war against theocratic politics, his promise to crush internal militancy

and efforts to avert war with India, noting however that they "are yet to pass the test of sincerity."

"The real test for the military regime comes in ridding the theocratic structure set in place," Benazir wrote in the Dubai daily.

But she continued: "In overtly repudiating theocracy, the military regime took measures, literally, from the manifesto and agenda of the democratic forces."

"The overt declarations by the Musharraf regime, irrespective of its covert intentions, mark the amazing victory of the ideas of the democratic forces."

"It is a watershed time in the history of Pakistan where the politics of the establishment are publicly repudiated by the establishment itself."

Benazir, who divides her time in exile between London and Dubai, hoped for a peaceful transformation.

VHP begins week-long march for Ram Temple

AFP, Ayodhya

Thousands of Hindu activists and holy men set off Monday on a 600-kilometer (380-mile) procession to New Delhi to push their demands for a temple to be built on the remains of a mosque razed nine years ago by Hindu zealots.

The procession, organised by the right-wing Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), began in the northern town of Ayodhya, site of the 1992 mosque

razing that sparked some of post-independence India's worst Hindu-Muslim violence.

The convoy is scheduled to reach the Indian capital on Saturday, where the organisers will hand a memorandum to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee demanding the government hand over a large plot of land around the disputed religious site so that plans to build a Hindu temple on the mosque's ruins can get off the ground.

Ethnic fighting breaks out in N Afghanistan

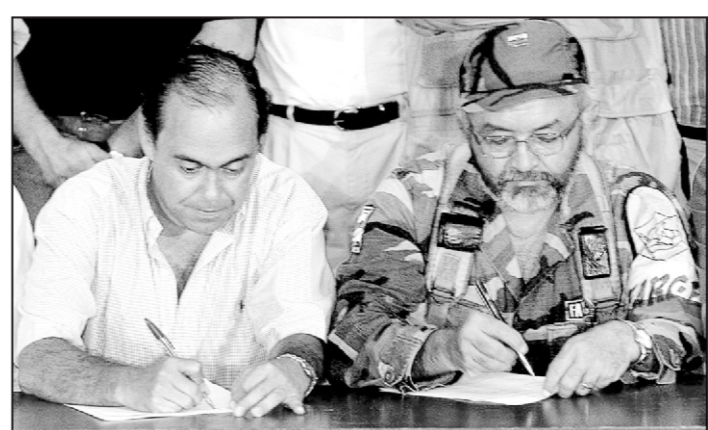
AFP, Kabul

Fighting between factions of Afghanistan's fragile Northern Alliance reportedly broke out Monday even as pledges of reconstruction aid flowed in from international donors meeting in Japan.

Representatives from over 50 countries at a donors conference in Tokyo promised to provide over one billion dollars this year and a total of more than three billion dollars over a longer period to help rebuild Afghanistan.

But a report of factional infighting in northern Afghanistan raised fears long-standing ethnic rivalries could again split the country after the defeat of the Northern Alliance's common enemy the Taliban.

The Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported that ethnic Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostam's forces and ethnic Tajik fighters loyal to former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani had been fighting in northern Kunduz province for two days.



Colombian government peace representative Camilo Gomez (L) and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) spokesman Raul Reyes sign copies of an accord on Sunday in Los Pozos. The FARC and government agreed to a ceasefire, which may come into effect from April 7.