

Taliban FM surrenders

Afghan minister terms Muttawakil a war criminal

AFP, Washington

The most senior Taliban official yet to fall into US hands was being held in Kandahar Saturday after officials said the ousted Afghan regime's foreign minister, a close ally of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, had turned himself in.

A Pentagon spokesman said former Taliban foreign minister Mullah Abdul Wakil Muttawakil turned himself in voluntarily to the US military in Kandahar.

"The former Taliban foreign minister turned himself in voluntarily and is now at under US control at the detention center in Kandahar," Lieutenant Colonel Ken McClellan told AFP late Friday.

"I don't think they're discussing the particulars of how it came about," McClellan said.

Afghanistan's new rulers Saturday branded the highest-ranking Taliban official yet to fall into US hands a war criminal who should be put on trial.

Former Taliban foreign minister Mullah Abdul Wakil Muttawakil surrendered to the US military in southern Kandahar province late Friday.

Although not considered a part of ousted Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar's inner circle, Muttawakil could yield valuable information to US investigators on the elusive Omar and suspected terror mastermind Osama bin Laden.

His voluntary surrender to US forces coincided with confirmation that ex-king Mohammad Zahir Shah, a powerful rallying figure for unity, will return home to spend the rest of his days in Afghanistan.

Commenting on Muttawakil's surrender, interim Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah said: "Taliban leaders have committed crimes against

humanity in Afghanistan.

"They were a part of the problem. They created misery for our people. The world has suffered because of what they did," he told a news conference.

"They cannot be a part of the solution, they were a part of the problem and they deserve justice and to be treated as war criminals because they supported terrorism."

Abdullah had no details of the circumstances of Muttawakil's surrender, but a Pentagon spokesman said Friday the former foreign minister had turned himself in voluntarily to the US military in Kandahar.

Omar and al-Qaida leader bin Laden have proven more elusive since the Taliban fell late last year under heavy US bombardment, launched in reprisal for the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

About 50 US soldiers searched the remote mountain district of Zhawar Kili in eastern Afghanistan early Saturday after a CIA missile strike hit a group of senior al-Qaida members, apparently including a tall man who was being treated with great deference by those around him.

A US official refused to say whether the man may have been Saudi-born bin Laden, whose height is 1.93 meters (six feet four inches).

"He was clearly someone who was senior," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"But beyond that I can't take you any further than that, and there are a number of senior al-Qaida guys who are taller than average."

The Taliban, who sheltered their "honoured guest" bin Laden, were replaced in December by an interim leadership headed by ethnic-Pashtun royalist Hamid Karzai.

Mosque siege ends : 2 killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops have shot dead two Muslim militants who had barricaded themselves inside a mosque in Kashmir, a police spokesman said Saturday.

Considerable damage was inflicted on the mosque in Tootgund village, some 85 km north of the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar, during an overnight gun battle.

"There was a fierce exchange of fire between the militants and the security troops who had ringed the mosque. The siege finally ended after the troops gunned down both the militants," said a senior police official.

The latest in a series of mosque sieges in the troubled Himalayan region had begun early Friday.

Police officials had initially said there could have been three militants hiding inside the mosque, but only two were discovered.

Princess Margaret dead

AFP, London

Britain's Princess Margaret, the younger sister of Queen Elizabeth II, died on Saturday after suffering a stroke, Buckingham Palace said in an official statement.

"The Queen, with great sadness, has asked for the following announcement to be made immediately: her beloved sister, Princess Margaret, died peacefully in her sleep this morning at 6:30am (GMT) in the King Edward VII Hospital."

The 71-year-old princess suffered a stroke on Friday, her fourth in as many years, and "developed cardiac problems during the night and was taken from Kensington Palace to the King Edward VII Hospital at 2:30am."

"Her children, Lord Linley and Lady Sarah Chatto, were at her side... and the Queen was kept fully informed throughout the night."

"Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, and other members of the Royal Family are being informed," the statement added.



This file picture dated May 14, 1996 shows Princess Margaret, Countess of Snowdon, waiting for French President Jacques Chirac at London's Waterloo Station. Princess Margaret has died, Buckingham Palace confirmed on Saturday. The 71-year-old princess had suffered two strokes in recent years.



Amitabh Bachchan waves to the crowd in Kanpur on Friday as he campaigns for Samajwadi Party for the upcoming state assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh. Polling in Uttar Pradesh begins on February 14.

US won't build permanent bases in Central Asia

AFP, Washington

The United States has moved to quell growing fears in Russia and China over its military build up in Central Asia, saying it "does not seek" to create permanent military bases in the region.

The assurance came after consultations held here on Friday by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Russia First Deputy Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Trubnikov as part of the US-Russian Working Group on Afghanistan.

A joint statement issued at the conclusion of the meeting stated that "the American side emphasized that the US does not seek to establish permanent military bases in Central Asia."

The promise was expected to

address concern expressed by some officials in Russia and China that the US military buildup in Afghanistan and surrounding countries as part of the US-led war on terrorism could be permanently altering the geostrategic situation in the region.

The United States and its Western allies are modernising and expanding Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, which eventually is expected to be able to house 3,000 troops.

According to US military officials, the base is already serving as a refuelling stop for US C-17 transport planes flying out of Afghanistan and is expected to become soon a hub for KC-135 air tankers as well as F/A-18s and French Mirage 2000s fighter jets.

India looks to US for arms

AFP, New Delhi

India Saturday said it was looking to acquire more sophisticated weapon systems from the United States a day after failing to clinch a raft of billion-dollar defence deals with Russia.

Defence Minister George Fernandes said India was hoping buy military hardware from the US after both sides agreed to boost cooperation, especially on counter-terrorism initiatives, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

"We have found common ground for restoring mutual cooperation in defence ties after the September 11 terror attacks in New York and Washington," Fernandes said.

"We are looking at acquiring more sophisticated weaponry from the US which other nations are not in a position to produce and deliver at short notice."

His comments came after talks Friday with traditional military ally Russia failed to reach any agreement on several defence deals that could have had far-reaching strategic implications.

But the two sides did pledge to pursue the deals that

were not finalised despite two days of intense talks in New Delhi between teams led by Fernandes and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov.

Klebanov and Fernandes hinted at the deadlock on the leasing of several TU-22 long-range strategic bombers, as well as the purchase of the ageing Russian aircraft carrier, Admiral Gorskov, by India.

"The technical discussions have been completed. The price negotiation is what needs to be done," Fernandes said Friday.

"How much time it will take is too difficult to forecast at this time."

There was also no sign during Klebanov's trip of a widely expected deal on the Indian Navy leasing two Russian nuclear submarines.

Moscow, which had previously leased India a nuclear submarine, is presently pressuring New Delhi to shun Western arms bazaars and instead pick up Russian hardware such as the MIG-AT advanced jet trainer and an Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS).

Lankan coalition avoids split ahead of polls

REUTERS, Colombo

A Sri Lankan minister and deputy minister withdrew their resignations late on Friday averting a split with the ruling coalition before March elections, party officials said on Saturday.

Housing Minister Arumugam Thondaman and Deputy Livestock Minister Muthu Sivalingam had quit earlier on Friday over a dispute about nominations for local council polls in March, the new government's first electoral test.

Thondaman lends a key consti-

uent of the coalition which has a two-seat majority in parliament.

"They withdrew their resignations last night at the prime minister's behest after their differences were ironed out," said a senior official of Thondaman's Ceylon Workers Congress.

The congress is a partner in Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Front which won a snap election in December after the previous coalition government unravelled in waves of defections.

Fire at Japanese N-plant: 2 exposed to radiation

AFP, Tokyo

Two nuclear power station workers were exposed to radiation and suffered minor burns when fire broke out at a plant in northern Japan, a company official said Saturday.

The accident occurred at Onagawa, 300 km north of Tokyo, around 9:30 am (0030 GMT) on Saturday as about eight workers were inspecting the Onagawa Number Two nuclear plant, a spokesman for plant owner Tohoku Electric Power Co said.

'Pak-Afghan ties to be based on mutual respect'

AFP, Kabul

Pakistan and Afghanistan have agreed their future relations will be based on "mutual respect and non-interference", Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah said Saturday.

Speaking to the media a day after an Afghan delegation headed by interim leader Hamid Karzai paid a visit to Islamabad, Abdullah said a "new phase" had opened in relations between the previously hostile neighbours.

While Pakistan, he said, had in the past supported the now-ousted

Taliban regime, it had changed direction after last year's September 11 terrorist strikes on the United States.

Islamabad fully threw its weight behind Washington's riposte against terrorists worldwide and quickly cut ties with Afghanistan's then-ruling Taliban regime.

The Taliban was unable to sustain the pressure of the US bombing campaign and lost power on December 7.

"We are talking about a new situation, a new phase," Abdullah said.

Journalist abduction clouds Musharraf's US visit

AFP, Karachi

The 17-day old abduction of US journalist Daniel Pearl remained unsolved Saturday, threatening to overshadow a visit to the US by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

Musharraf departed early Saturday for a two-day stopover in Boston ahead of his official trip to Washington starting Tuesday, during which a massive aid package for Pakistan and the normalisation of its military relations with the US are expected to be announced.

Musharraf has been praised by US president George W. Bush for his crackdown on terrorism, but Pearl's kidnapping has exposed a continuing militant force in Pakistan with links extending to the Kashmir separatist struggle and the al-Qaida terror network of Osama bin Laden.

Police Friday laid their first charges over the abduction against three men who have admitted to sending e-mails containing threats to kill Pearl and photos showing him in chains and with a gun pointed at his head.

But they have failed to locate four

chief suspects including the presumed mastermind, British-born extremist Sheikh Omar, who served time in an Indian prison for kidnapping tourists in 1993.

A US embassy spokesman would not comment on the case's progress on Saturday, saying only that "investigations are continuing and we're working closely with Pakistani authorities."

The charges marked the strongest progress so far in the case, which has seen investigators retreat from buoyant earlier predictions of locating Pearl "within days".

Canada unhappy with US unilateralism

REUTERS, Ottawa

The Canadian government, accused by critics of being slavishly pro-American, on Friday suddenly revived long-standing concerns about Washington's unilateralism and hit out at the "bellicose language" used by US President George W. Bush in his "axis of evil" speech last week.

What made the unexpected criticism significant was that it came from Deputy Prime Minister John Manley, one of the most vocal backers of the United States since the September 11 attacks and the man effectively in charge of ties with Washington.

But Manley and other senior ministers are under heavy fire from influential backbench legislators in the ruling Liberal Party, who fear that Ottawa's strong support for the US war on terrorism could jeopardize Canadian sovereignty.

Manley, who has ambitions to become prime minister one day, used a question-and-answer session with law students in Ottawa to make clear that Canada still disagreed with the United States on a number of important topics.

These included Washington's refusal to sign a major anti-landmines convention, its withdrawal from the 1972 ABM arms control treaty last year and its reluctance to join the international effort to ban biological weapons.

"We think in terms of multilateral agreements on arms control, arms limitation and dangerous weapons that they are on the wrong track," Manley said.

While stressing that Ottawa still fully supported the US led campaign against terrorism, Manley said this did not mean Canada had shelved policies that fly in the face of Washington's unilateralism.

Arafat urges Sharon to resume talks

AFP, Jerusalem

Deadly violence flared up again in the Middle East after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon failed to persuade Washington to boycott Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in future negotiations.

Arafat, while under virtual house arrest in the West Bank town of Ramallah won an international diplomatic coup when US President George W. Bush rejected Sharon's urgings to freeze the Palestinian leader out of future negotiations.

Arafat told Sharon he "forgave" him, in an interview published Friday by an Israeli daily, and urged him to return to the negotiating table.

"A leader must know how to forgive, and I forgive Sharon. From the bottom of my heart, I send him this message: Please, Sharon, let us go back to the negotiating table," Arafat told Maariv.

In Washington, Sharon failed in a meeting on Thursday to convince Bush to boycott Arafat and rely on other Palestinian leaders for negotiations to put an end to the 16-month-old intifada which has killed nearly

1,200 people, including 911 Palestinians.

Arafat "is not and never will be a partner. He's out of play," the prime minister said, calling for an "alternative Palestinian leadership."

Bush agreed on keeping Arafat under pressure, but stopped short of questioning his credentials as the elected representative of the Palestinian people.

"I assured the prime minister that we would continue to keep pressure on Arafat to convince him that he must take serious, concrete, real steps to reduce terrorist activities in the Middle East," Bush said.

Israeli Defense Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer echoed Sharon's comments Friday in New York when he said he was "ready to talk with anyone" but accused Arafat of being "committed to the past."

The upsurge in violence underlines the need to return to the negotiating table.

Two Palestinians were killed Friday when their vehicle exploded in northern Israel, public television reported, quoting police sources as saying a bomb could have detonated prematurely as it was being taken to a target.

Anne pays tribute to explorers

AP, Wellington

A century after the start of exploration on the frozen Antarctic continent, Britain's Princess Anne on Saturday paid tribute to the courage, commitment, teamwork and risk-taking of the region's pioneer explorers.

"Those are the same attributes we need in this new age," she told a special commemorative dinner at New Zealand's Scott Base science station on the Antarctic coast.

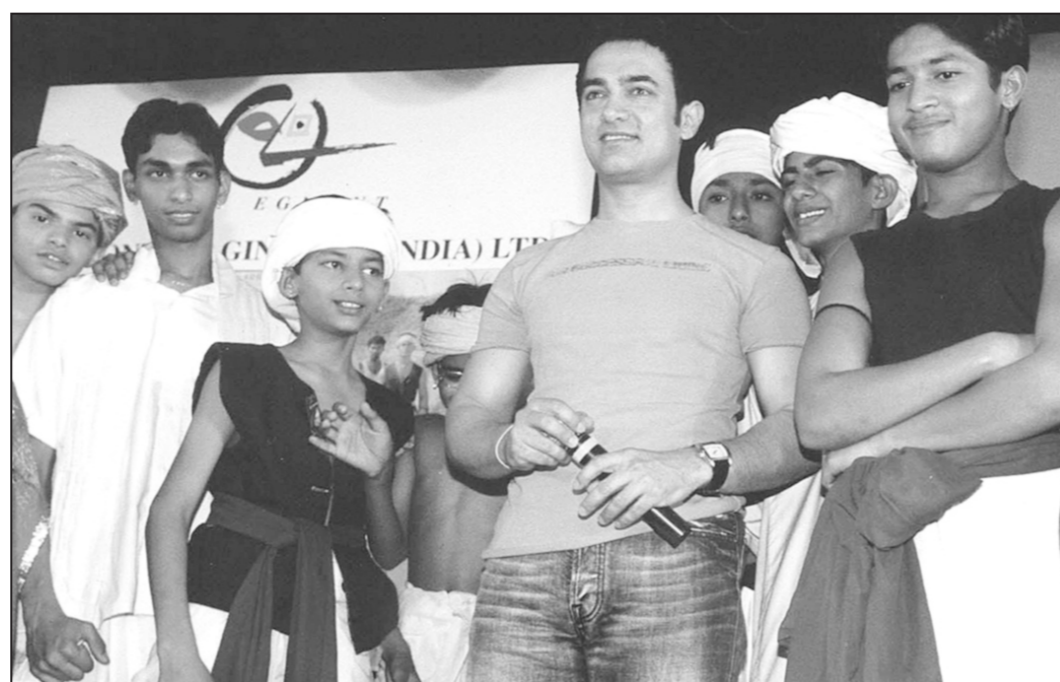
The princess, patron of the British-based Antarctic Heritage Trust, traveled to the Ross Sea ice shelf to commemorate the centenary of British explorer Robert Falcon Scott's arrival on the forbidding continent on February 6, 1902 at the start of the heroic age of Antarctic exploration.

Earlier she launched an international appeal to raise 35 million New Zealand dollars (US\$ 14.7 million) to restore and preserve four century-old huts and 30 other historic sites and artifacts on the ice shelf, the first gateway to the Antarctic.

Standing in the snow-covered landscape outside Scott's Discovery Hut on the Ross Sea coast, the princess called on the international community to support the effort to preserve the rapidly deteriorating huts.

"These huts stand as ... memorials to those explorers and their values," she told more than 100 people on the ice.

Without the support of the international community, "they will be lost forever," she added.



Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan poses with school children for the launch of the comic book based on his movie "Laagan" at the St. Anne's High School, Bandra in Bombay on Friday. Aamir Khan's blockbuster Laagan proved to be a hit in India and has also been nominated for the Oscar Awards in the foreign film category.