

# Al-Qaida, Taliban fighters attack US-led forces in E Afghanistan

AFP, Bagram Air Base

Taliban and al-Qaida fighters attacked US and other coalition troops around an airfield in eastern Afghanistan overnight, a US military spokesman said Wednesday.

"Coalition forces in the Khost area were attacked by Taliban and al-Qaida extremists using rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and machine guns," US Major Bryan Hilyerty told a press briefing at this US military base.

"There are no casualties that we are aware of now."

The Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) news agency, however, reported that three Afghan allies were killed and eight others injured in the attack on Khost airport, citing local sources.

Khost city lies 70 km east of the Shahi Kot valley where US-led forces have just wrapped up their 17-day Operation Anaconda against diehard Taliban and al-Qaida fighters in their last-known stronghold.

Afghan forces engaged in the offensive have said that many of the extremists escaped towards the Pakistani border. Khost is 30 km from the border.

The attackers struck a camp of coalition soldiers in the vicinity of the Khost airfield just after midnight, Major Hilyerty said.

Coalition forces returned fire in a gunfight that lasted several hours, Hilyerty said, declining to reveal the number of troops involved.

"It was a known coalition camp that was taken under fire. We fired back," he said, adding that no enemy fighters were captured.

But US Major General Frank Hagenbeck, who commanded Operation Anaconda, said it was unclear whether the coalition forces had been targeted or were caught up in an internal clash.

"We're trying to work out if it was directed at coalition forces in the vicinity or just rivalries. We know there has been tension in that area," he told reporters here.

"The attacks were in and around the airfield and some of the housing adjacent to the airfield."

AIP reported that two airfields were attacked, including Khost's main airport, southeast of the city, and a US base in Sarabagh some five km north-east.

US forces use the Sarabagh base to train Afghan soldiers, the private Pakistani-based news agency said.

Residents told AIP they were woken by "thuds of heavy gunfire."

One resident said US helicopters fired rockets during the attack.

Tensions had flared in Khost on Tuesday after a shootout between supporters of the Khost governor and rival backers of the local police chief, AIP reported.

Meanwhile, Security concerns have been diminishing in Kabul since the installation of the interim administration in December, UN special representative for Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi said on Wednesday.

"There is a diminishing concern of security, not a growing concern," Brahimi said here.

## Kashmir cops to protect rebel leaders

AFP, Srinagar

Authorities in Indian-administered Kashmir said Wednesday they will continue to protect top separatist politicians, despite criticism by pro-India groups.

"It is the responsibility of the state to protect the lives of vulnerable citizens who are under veritable threat from any quarter," Kashmir Home Minister Khalid Najeeb Soharwardhy said.

He turned down demands by pro-India groups that security be dropped for officials of the All-Party Hurriyat Conference, the main separatist alliance, because of their "leading role in the anti-India movement."

Hurriyat leaders have been targeted by assailants in the past.

Former alliance chairman Omar Farooq, who is also Kashmir's head Muslim cleric, is provided with four guards. More than a dozen policemen protect his lakeside residence in Srinagar, Indian Kashmir's summer capital.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli police investigators search for clues after a Palestinian suicide bomber exploded himself in a passenger bus filled with early morning travellers near the northern Israeli Arab village of Musmus on Wednesday. At least seven people were killed and dozens more wounded in the attack.

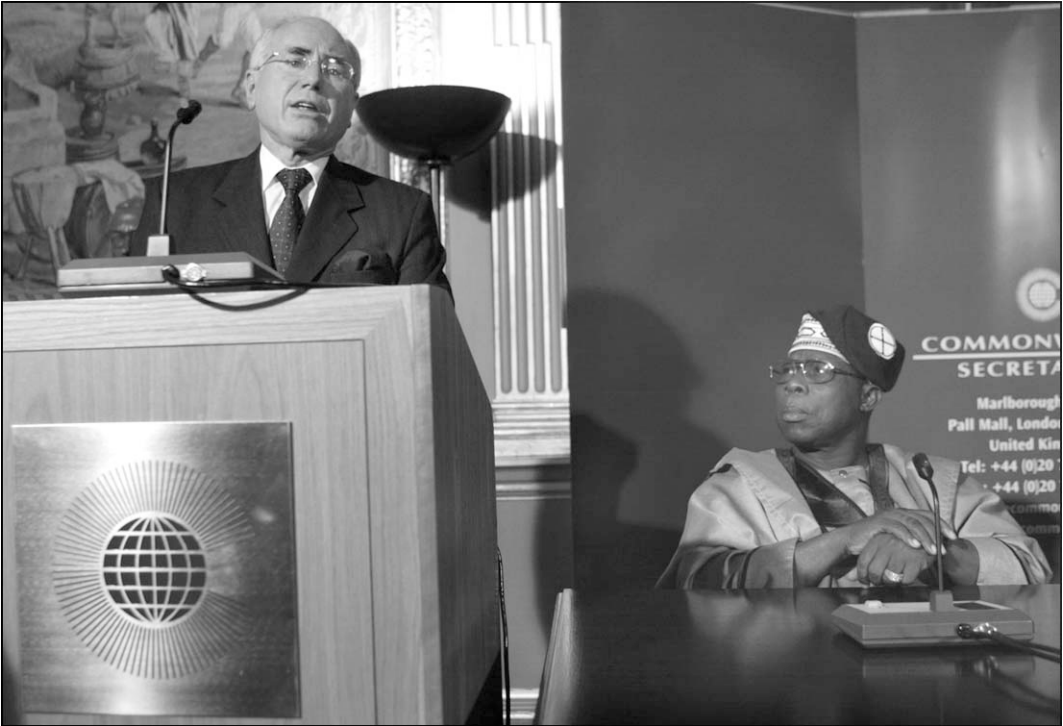


PHOTO: AFP

Australian Prime minister John Howard (L) announces the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth while Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo listens in at the Commonwealth secretariat in London on Tuesday. Australian Prime Minister John Howard, South African President Thabo Mbeki and Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo met to discuss the outcome of the recent elections in Zimbabwe, which secured President Robert Mugabe a new 6 year term, finding that the elections were flawed. They suspended Zimbabwe from the organisation for a year.

## US imposes travel ban on 6 Mugabe aides

### Australia rules out sanctions

AFP, Washington

The United States on Tuesday added six associates of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe to a travel ban against members of his party and government as it considered further sanctions against the country's leadership, a senior US official said.

The official, speaking to reporters on condition of anonymity, said the extension of the travel ban to the six was just the first step in the expansion of sanctions to protest last week's fraudulent elections.

The travel ban now applies to 26 top Zimbabwean officials, four of whom have children attending universities in the United States, the official said.

Mugabe and 19 others were placed on the visa blacklist last month.

The official said he expected that targeted financial sanctions against those on the travel ban list would likely be approved in about

two weeks.

Earlier, the White House and State Department said Washington was still mulling responses to Zimbabwe's "fraudulent" presidential election and chided African nations for turning "a blind eye" to irregularities in the vote.

"The United States is continuing its conversations with allied nations about what the proper response should be to the fraudulent election in Zimbabwe," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

Meanwhile, Australian Prime Minister John Howard has ruled out sanctions against Zimbabwe after the Commonwealth suspended the African country for one year on Tuesday.

Howard called on Zimbabwe to hold new presidential elections after a committee of leaders headed by Howard ruled its elections earlier this month, which saw Robert Mugabe returned to power, were neither free nor fair.

## Pak cops enforce new security measures in wake of church attack

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani Police investigating a deadly church attack in the capital carried out raids and detentions Wednesday as new officers took over from four senior police suspended over the security lapse surrounding the attack.

No-one has been arrested over the Sunday morning attack in which five people were killed, but police detained some 30 people, mostly illegal immigrants, in overnight raids as part of increased security checks, a police officer told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi and Somali nationals were among those detained. All except three Iraqis and one Afghan have been released after their papers were checked, he said. The four are being held for overstaying their visas.

Police investigators meanwhile were taking witness testimonies from worshippers recovering in hospital from injuries sustained in the attack, the officer added.

US diplomat Milton Green's wife Barbara and their daughter Kristin were killed in the attack, along with a Pakistani woman and an Afghan man.

## SC asks govt to chart plan to protect Taj Mahal

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court Wednesday ordered the government to formulate security plans to prevent possible attacks by Islamic militant groups on the Taj Mahal, a report said.

According to the United News of India (UNI) news agency, the federal government as well as the local government in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, where the famous marble monument to love is situated, were given until April 9 to present the security proposals to the court.

The court was hearing a public interest petition filed seeking to protect the 16th-century Mughal era monument from air pollution when the threat posed by Islamic militant groups was also considered, the UNI report said.

Security measures at the Taj Mahal were tightened in January after Uttar Pradesh government officials said they had received threats via e-mail, allegedly from the Lashkar-e-Taiba Muslim militant group which is fighting Indian rule in Kashmir, threatening to blow up the monument.

There was a swift denial from Lashkar -- one of two Pakistan-based militant outfits blamed by India for an attack on its parliament on December 13, which triggered a dangerous military build-up along the Indo-Pakistan border.

## Indian House adjourned over sectarian riots

AFP, New Delhi

India's lower house of parliament was adjourned Wednesday as a belligerent opposition demanded a statement on last month's sectarian violence which claimed about 700 lives.

The Samajwadi (Socialist) party, whose support base is Muslims and lower-caste Hindus, charged that the Hindu nationalist-led government was trying to divide the country and demanded an explanation.

"Not a single rioter has been arrested in Gujarat and only Muslims have been shot dead," said opposition MP Raghuvansh Prasad Singh of the regional RJD party, which supported the Samajwadi party's move.

## 'N Korea must talk with US'

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung said Wednesday that North Korea had to resume talks with the United States to avoid increased tensions with the world superpower.

The communist North has frozen contacts since President George W. Bush took office in Washington, but President Kim said "North Korea has no option but to talk."

Speaking to foreign ministry officials, he added: "It is only the United States that can give the security guarantees and economic assistance the North desperately needs."

## Tommy's trial begins

AFP, Jakarta

Tommy Suharto, youngest son of the former Indonesian dictator, stood trial in a heavily guarded court Wednesday for the murder of a judge in a spectacle that would have been unthinkable during his father's decades in power.

Hutomo "Tommy" Mandala Putra listened calmly as prosecutors read out charges punishable by death -- commissioning the contract killing of the supreme court judge who had ordered him jailed for corruption and illegally possessing firearms and explosives.

The former millionaire playboy tycoon, a symbol of nepotism during his father's rule from 1966-1998, refused to enter a formal plea. The



Tommy Suharto

hearing was adjourned till March 27 and Tommy was returned under armed guard to the jail where Suharto-era political prisoners were once held.

## Malaysia offers amnesty to illegal immigrants

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia will grant an amnesty with immediate effect to thousands of illegal immigrants, mainly Indonesians if they surrender voluntarily, according to a report on Wednesday.

They would be allowed to return home without being punished, Chor Chee Heung, deputy home minister was quoted as saying by the New Straits Times newspaper.

"They would be sent back to their country of origin as soon as possible," he told reporters at parliament.

Chor said the amnesty was introduced because under the new proposed amendments to the Immigration Act, illegal immigrants caught could be whipped. "So we are giving them a chance to leave without being punished."

The stiff amendments are expected to be passed during the current sitting of parliament.

"This is because of the seriousness of the offence and the increasing number of illegal immigrants entering the country," he said.

Malaysia granted a similar amnesty in 1998.

On March 10, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the government had no intention to hold illegal immigrants at detention centres for long periods because it was costly.

"If possible, we do not want too many detention centres. We want to deport them quickly," he said.

The Straits Times said the number of illegals caught rose to 156,420 last year from 100,103 in 2002. In 1999 it stood at only 78,051.

## Attack on local leader in Lahore: 2 bodyguards killed

AFP, Lahore

Attackers threw grenades and opened fire on a leader of one of Pakistan's main political parties here Wednesday, seriously wounding him and killing two of his bodyguards, police said.

Akhlaq Ahmad Guddo, a popular former district chief of the Pakistani People's Party (PPP), was leaving his home in this eastern city when attackers "hurled grenades and fired indiscriminately" at his car around 8:15 am, a Lahore police officers said.

"We have reports that about seven to 10 people, some carrying Kalashnikov rifles and grenades, launched the attack," PPP spokesman Nazir Dhoki told AFP.

## WHO spells fresh TB alert

AFP, Manila

The World Health Organisation (WHO) issued a fresh tuberculosis (TB) alert on Wednesday, saying the disease was a major culprit behind the poverty in East Asia and the Pacific where it kills 1,000 mostly poor productive workers daily.

"It is unacceptable that a curable disease such as TB continues to strike down millions every year, when treatment costs as little as 10 dollars per patient," said Shigeru Omi, the Manila-based regional director of WHO's Western Pacific Regional Office.

In a message ahead of the World TB Day on Sunday, Omi said governments would be able to contribute to alleviating poverty by controlling TB.

"Studies show us that disease is a major factor in poverty. By lifting the disease burden, you give the

poor at least a fighting chance to raise themselves out of poverty," he said.

The highest levels of TB in the region are found in Cambodia, China, Laos, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, and Vietnam -- all countries with high levels of poverty.

Symptoms include persistent cough, which is not responsive to antibiotics, fever and weight loss. It may occur outside of the lungs in lymph nodes, bones, kidneys and the central nervous system.

The WHO says the poor are more likely to suffer from TB, which strikes in situations of overcrowding, inadequate ventilation and malnutrition. The poor also tend to receive inadequate health care.

"The result: ill-health worsens poverty," Omi said, warning that because 99 per cent of TB deaths occurred in the developing world, it

perpetuated "a cycle of poverty nearly impossible to escape."

TB is economically hard on families because 70 per cent of TB victims are 15 to 54 years old, the most productive working years, WHO studies show.

About 20 to 30 per cent of a household's annual income may be lost if the breadwinner becomes sick with TB, it said. If the TB sufferer dies, an average of 15 years of income will be lost.

"The benefits of diagnosing and treating TB far outweigh the economic costs of what happens when this devastating disease is left untreated," Omi said.

A key problem in fighting TB is lack of funds.



PHOTO: AFP

A man displays a grenade beside a damaged car where two bodyguards of Pakistan's main political party were killed after an attack by unidentified gunmen in Lahore on Wednesday.