

US military plane crashes in Afghanistan: 3 killed

AFP, Bagram Airbase

Three US servicemen were killed when a military plane crashed shortly after take-off in an al-Qaida and Taliban hotbed in eastern Afghanistan, a coalition spokesman said Thursday.

Seven others were injured in the apparent accident 35 miles (55 kilometres) southwest of Gardez, capital of the troubled eastern Pakhtia province.

"The seven injured were transferred to Kandahar airbase and are in a stable condition," Lieutenant Colonel Roger King told reporters here. Two of them were later evacuated to Germany.

King said the MC-130 transporter plane crashed about three miles (five kilometres) after takeoff from a forward operating base near the Bande Sardeh dam at around 9:30pm (1700 GMT) on Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP

A man carries an elderly woman to safety after floodwaters destroyed her home in the outskirts of Xian on Thursday in the northern province of Shaanxi. Waters in northern China's flood-stricken Shaanxi province were receding as rescuers frantically searched for up to 266 missing persons feared swept away in a torrential deluge.

500 Maoists rebels attack security post in Nepal

REUTERS, Kathmandu

About 500 Maoist rebels have attacked a remote security post overnight in Nepal and fighting was still going on but there was no word on casualties, a government official has said.

Troop reinforcements had been rushed to the site of the raid on Thursday in the Salyan district, 400 km (250 miles) from Kathmandu, in the Maoist heartland of west Nepal, he said.

It was the latest big assault by the rebels in an increasingly bloody six-year fight to overthrow the constitutional monarchy and install a communist republic.

"The fighting between security forces and terrorists is still going on and details of the battle, including casualties on both sides, are awaited," the official told Reuters.

6 more killed in Indo-Pak border firing

REUTERS, Jammu/Muzaffarabad

Six people have been killed in an exchange of heavy fire between India and Pakistan along their tense frontier in disputed Kashmir, officials on the two sides have said.

The fighting, which followed a recent lull, came hours after U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld arrived in Islamabad from New Delhi for talks with President Pervez Musharraf, on the second leg of a regional tour to avert war between the nuclear-capable foes.

Rumsfeld said on Wednesday India was taking "constructive steps" to reduce tensions with Pakistan. He was expected to keep up U.S. pressure on Musharraf to crack down on Muslim militants blamed by India for separatist violence in Indian Kashmir.

World religious leaders talk peace, tolerance

AFP, Bangkok

Over 100 of the world's key religious figures gathered here Thursday to open the inaugural World Council of Religious Leaders with calls for peace, tolerance and a reduction in conflicts.

The council, an initiative of the Millennium World Peace Summit (MWPS) of August 2000, is to serve as a resource to the United Nations and governments in conflict prevention and resolution efforts.

"The launch of the council is ... timely at a moment when problems and tension are often seen as connected with religious, ethnic and cultural misunderstanding and intolerance," Kim Hak-Su, executive secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, said in his address.

'Dirty bomb' suspect faces weak evidence

REUTERS, New York

There is insufficient evidence to indict an American accused of plotting a radioactive "dirty bomb" attack on the United States and he should be released, his lawyer has argued.

In papers seeking to free New York native Jose Padilla, who goes by the name Abdullah al Muhajir, his lawyer said the evidence against him was weak at best and that his constitutional rights were being violated.

"Based on recent information, there no longer exists probable cause to detain Padilla for any reason," said defence lawyer Donna Newman in a petition filed on Wednesday.

'India may pull back if Pakistan keeps words'

AFP, New Delhi

India could consider pulling back some of its troops from its international borders with Pakistan once it is convinced Islamabad has permanently stopped the flow of Islamic rebels into Kashmir and dismantled their camps, an official said Thursday.

However, the bulk of its massive deployment along its international borders and the Line of Control, the de facto border in Kashmir, will remain at least until October, when elections are held in the disputed state, the defence ministry official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

He said this message was conveyed to visiting US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on Wednesday when he was in New Delhi on the first leg of a peace mission to South Asia.

"What we conveyed to the visiting US Defence Secretary was that India was willing to consider pulling back some offensive troops from the international border if Pakistan takes the steps we have demanded," the official said.

"This does not mean demobilisation. It is also conditional to Pakistan ending infiltration of Islamic militants into Indian-administered Kashmir and dismantling militant training camps in Pakistani-administered Kashmir," the official said.

"Our demands are the same and there is no change in our stance," he added.

According to a report in the Hindu newspaper on Thursday, this step was indicative of New Delhi wishing not "to perpetuate the military confrontation"

with Pakistan if there was "genuine effort by Islamabad to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism."

Islamabad last week gave an assurance to visiting US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage that it would permanently halt the flow of insurgents.

The question of insurgency is at the core of the current dangerous military stand-off between Indian and Pakistan, who between them have around one million troops massed on their common frontiers, backed by tanks, warplanes and heavy artillery.

The showdown was sparked by an attack on India's parliament complex in December which New Delhi blamed on two Pakistan-based Islamic militant groups battling Indian rule in Kashmir.

Tensions between the two countries heightened further in May after an Islamic militant attack on a civilian bus and an army camp near Kashmir's winter capital Jammu in which 35 people, including three rebels were killed.

The defence ministry official said India's emphasis was on ensuring transparent and violence-free elections in Kashmir.

"And for that we need the troops on the borders," he said. But some Indian troops stationed along the western international borders with Pakistan -- in Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat -- might be allowed home on leave before then, he said.

"The army could give some of the men leave of absence to visit family, as before," the official said, adding that a number of troops had had their leave cancelled in the wake of the Jammu attack.

Bush considers state for Palestinians

AP, Washington

President Bush is moving toward a declaration of how to establish a Palestinian state as he rounds out Middle East consultations with the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia.

An announcement by the President fleshing out his call for Palestinian statehood could come as early as next week. It is likely to be balanced with calls for firmer measures to end terror attacks on Israel.

Secretary of State Colin Powell has floated the idea of a provisional Palestinian state. White House and State Department officials said Powell's statement was premature, but they did not reject the possibility of an interim state.

Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, was meeting Thursday with Bush to reinforce the request of several Arab leaders that Bush act quickly to create a state and to compel Israel to give up all of the West Bank, Gaza and part of Jerusalem.

Last week, President Hosni

Mubarak of Egypt asked Bush to set a deadline. Bush turned him down, but Powell said Wednesday that did not rule it out entirely.

In suggesting the possibility of an interim Palestinian state, Powell left open the possibility Yasser Arafat would head it.

"It isn't all that new and revolutionary a suggestion," Powell told reporters as he flew to a foreign ministers meeting in Canada. "It's been a pretty consistent element in all of the discussions about how to move forward in the Middle East."

Upon his arrival in Canada, Powell said: "What I have been doing is trying to help the press and the public understand the options that are out there, and help the press and the public understand the advice that the president has been receiving."

In an interview Monday with an Arabic-language newspaper, Powell said creating a provisional state would give the Palestinian people "something they can put their hopes in, their dreams in, something the international community can invest

in with some confidence."

"I think almost everybody has come to the agreement there is a need for provisional or interim steps," Powell said.

By Wednesday, en route to British Columbia, Powell had eased back, saying an interim state was one of many ideas long under consideration. A senior administration official said Bush is seriously considering provisional statehood but has not reached a final decision.

Saeb Erekat, a senior Palestinian negotiator, responded coolly to the suggestion. "I don't know what he means by that," Erekat said. "The main thing here is to end the Israeli occupation and to have Israel withdraw" to its old borders.

Nasser al-Kidwa, the Palestinian observer at the United Nations, said there must be a "clear definition of the final outcome" for any interim measure to work. In fact, he said, "it might take us to a worse situation."

New asteroids may reveal Solar System secrets

REUTERS, London

A newly-discovered cluster of asteroids formed 5.8 billion years ago could provide important clues about the origins of the Solar System, scientists say.

Scientists at the Southwest Research Institute in Boulder, Colorado, discovered the family of 39 asteroids in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter and for the first time used a computer model to accurately date when they were formed.

At 5.8 billion years old, the family is the youngest known asteroid cluster in the 4.5 billion year lifetime of the Solar System. Others are hundreds of millions of years old.

The cluster, formed when a 25-km (15-mile) asteroid was struck by a smaller object, could help to answer many questions about what happens when asteroids break up and whether one on course for a collision with Earth could be diverted.

UK closes in on tough immigration laws

AFP, London

Controversial British government reforms of asylum and immigration measures cleared the lower house of parliament late Wednesday, taking a huge step closer to becoming law.

Members of Parliament backed the House of Commons' third reading of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill by 362 votes to 74, a government majority of 288.

The bill must now be passed by the House of Lords, parliament's upper chamber, before becoming enshrined in law. Here it is expected to face stiffer scrutiny than in the Commons.

Speaking ahead of Wednesday's vote Home Secretary David Blunkett told MPs that the bill struck a balance between providing a

"warm welcome" for asylum seekers and a "hard-headed and sensible but sensitive approach in ensuring our hospitality is not exploited".

Oliver Letwin, home affairs spokesman for the opposition Conservatives, said the bill remained a "curate's egg -- with some good bits and some bad bits".

Blunkett has introduced a series of last-minute additions to the bill, unveiled in its original form late last year, in a bid to boost public confidence in border controls.

They have been breached on many occasions in recent months, particularly through the Channel Tunnel linking Britain to France.

The new measures include plans to remove unsuccessful claimants of asylum to other nations -- such as France -- pending any appeal.

Clash in Mumbai after state govt wins confidence motion

AFP, Mumbai

Thousands of rival political supporters clashed Thursday in downtown Mumbai, injuring at least seven people, after the state government won a motion to stay in power.

More than 2,000 people, split between backers of Maharashtra state's ruling Congress party alliance and right-wing Hindu groups, threw stones and glass bottles at one another outside the state assembly after the vote in the house.

Three policemen, one journalist and several of the demonstrators were injured by the flying debris, said an AFP reporter at the scene.

Some 500 police baton-charged the crowd, fired tear-gas and set up a cordon to separate the feuding sides. Another 1,000 officers stood guard to block the mob from nearing

the assembly. The street fighting came after Maharashtra's Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh won a confidence motion in the assembly by 143 to 133.

But the opposition cried foul, noting that the house speaker had disqualified from voting seven rebel members of the ruling coalition. Five other lawmakers abstained.

An alliance of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP party and the far-right Hindu movement Shiv Sena had been hoping to oust Deshmukh, who backs India's main opposition Congress party.

Maharashtra plunged into political turmoil at the beginning of June when nine lawmakers withdrew their support for Deshmukh, charging he was too conciliatory toward the Hindu right.

India rules out foreign troops to help flush out al-Qaida

AFP, New Delhi

India Thursday ruled out the deployment of foreign troops on its territory to help flush out al-Qaida fighters which US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said are likely operating in Kashmir.

"Our troops are well capable of dealing with the situation themselves and there is absolutely no possibility of foreign troops operating in any territory in India," Indian Junior Foreign Minister Omar Abdullah told a press conference here.

He also said dialogue between India and Pakistan on their dispute in Kashmir will take place once India is convinced Islamabad has stopped sponsoring Islamic militancy.

"India, Pakistan dialogue will take place. It has to take place, but it will take place once we are completely sure that Pakistan has turned the corner irreversibly," Abdullah said.

The Times of India in a report coinciding with Rumsfeld's visit to New Delhi on Wednesday on the first leg of a South Asia peace mission said the deployment of international troops in Kashmir was being seriously considered.

It added the troops would be sent to the area under the guise of helping hunt down al-Qaida fighters but they would also play a dual role by monitoring infiltrations into Indian-controlled territory by Pakistan-based militants.

The report was shot down both by Indian and US officials, who said that instead Rumsfeld had discussed the possibility of using mechanical ground sensors to monitor infiltrations.

Abdullah said Rumsfeld's acknowledgement of the possibility of al-Qaida operating in the disputed state of Kashmir was a "very important and positive development for India" as it meant the world was at last waking up to the dangers al-Qaida posed in Kashmir.

The defence secretary said before flying to Islamabad late Wednesday that there were signs al-Qaida fighters were inside Indian Kashmir near the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border between India and Pakistan.

"I have seen indications that there are in fact al-Qaida operating in the area that we're talking about near the Line of Control," Rumsfeld said.

Abdullah also acknowledged that Pakistan was starting to make good its promise to stem the flow of militants crossing the LoC to launch murderous attacks on Indian targets.

"What is absolutely essential," he said, however, "is that the camps on the ground must close and the financial support to the terrorists and separatists operating in Jammu and Kashmir must end and there must be clear evidence of this taking place before we can consider any revival of dialogue between India and Pakistan."



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of the rightwing Shiv Sena party and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) supporters pelt stones at Congress Party supporters in Mumbai on Thursday. The melee came after Maharashtra state Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh won a confidence motion in the state assembly by 143 to 133 vote. An alliance of India's ruling BJP and the Shiv Sena had been hoping to oust Deshmukh who backs India's main opposition Congress Party.



PHOTO: AFP

Colombian pop star Shakira shows the combined Scandinavian golden records she received for the sales of her record 'Laundry Service' during a press conference in Helsinki on Wednesday ahead of her concert.

Pakistan detains several US citizens linked to al-Qaida

AFP, Washington

Pakistan declared it arrested several US citizens linked to al-Qaida near the Afghani border, including a possible associate of suspected "dirty bomb" builder Jose Padilla, The New York Times reported Thursday.

The detainees -- whose nationality has yet to be confirmed by United States officials -- are part of some 400 suspected al-Qaida and Taliban fighters captured by Pakistan since December, senior Pakistani officials told the paper.

Among the captured are disaf-

fecteds Westerners converted to Islam who have been recruited to fight with al-Qaeda, Taliban forces or with guerrillas in Kashmir, the disputed region claimed by India and Pakistan.

The arrests were made along Pakistan's remote tribal areas near the border with Afghanistan.

The arrested men who claim to be American include Ahmed Muhammed, whom Pakistani officials believe is an associate of Padilla, the Chicago-born convict who took the name Abdullah al-Muhajir upon converting to Islam.

Africa & Asia hot spots of armed conflicts: SIPRI

AFP, Stockholm

Africa and Asia were home to two-thirds of the world's 24 major armed conflicts in 2001, cementing a 12-year trend since the end of the Cold War, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) said Thursday.

The only new conflict registered in the world last year was that between the United States and the al-Qaida network responsible for the September 11 attacks, which SIPRI described as "the most dramatic conflict developments of

2001". The attacks claimed more than 3,000 lives "in a matter of hours and changed the foreign policy agenda of the United States, the world's leading actor."

The total number of major armed conflicts around the world in 2001 was slightly lower than in 2000, when there were 25 major armed conflicts.

The war in Sierra Leone and the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia were the only conflicts in 2000 not on the list in 2001.