INTERNATIONAL

US-led forces kill 9 Afghan militants

AFP, Kabul

US-led forces in Afghanistan have killed nine suspected militants and captured 14 others in two separate operations in troubled southeastern Afghanistan, a US military spokesman said.

The nine suspected Taliban fighters were killed Friday near a coalition base in the town of Orgun near the Pakistani border when they "attempted to flank" the base, Lieutenant Colonel Bryan Hilferty told journalists in Kabul.

"Friday, a platoon-sized (around 40) enemy unit attempted to flank a coalition position east of Orgun," he said.

"We engaged the unit, killing nine anti-coalition militia," Hilferty said, adding that there were no coalition casualty during

Separately 14 suspects were captured Thursday in neighboring Khost province during a US air assault on a compound north of Khost city, Hilferty said.

He said that there was no exchange of fire between US-led soldiers and the suspects. He said some 100 mortar rounds and other ammunition were seized from the

Iraq's constitution crisis throws question mark over US power transfer

Iraq's political future hung in the balance yesterday as another delay in creating an interim constitution threatened to derail plans by the US-led coalition to hand back power at the end of June, Iraqi

A carefully arranged signing ceremony at Saddam Hussein's former conference hall flopped on Friday after five Shia Muslim members of the US-picked Governing Council refused to attend because they disagreed with a clause in the basic law that gave what they felt to be unfair power to the Kurdish

The spoilers also wanted a greater presence in Iraq's next executive and indicated concern about Kurdish becoming an official state language, a source close to the negotiations told AFP.

Their objections came after consultations with the religious community's spiritual guide, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the

The unexpected back-track on what had been a done deal caught everyone by surprise and exposed deep rifts between the council that could consign the whole document to the history books, the sources

"They asked to have two days to go away and discuss the matter and then hopefully they will return on Monday and we will be able to get on with the signing ceremony," said Hatem al-Hassani, a deputy to Sunni Muslim council member Musin Abdul Hameed.

Asked what the consequences would be if the 25-member council failed to approve the text, Hassani said, "Then we would have a very

This would send a very damaging message to the people of Iraq and to the rest of the world."

The constitution had been hailed by council members and US overseer in Iraq Paul Bremer as one of the most progressive in the Middle East, laying the foundations for direct elections before the end of January 2005.

Failure to pass it into law could prolong the US-led coalition's occupation of the country.

"I think it would be very damaging," said Mahmud Othman, a Kurdish council member, when asked what would happen if the

council did not give its approval. "We would have to re-discuss the whole thing all over again," he

"If there is no signing of this document it could even affect the June 30 transfer of sovereignty.'

Senior coalition spokesman Dan Senor remained confident the power transfer would take place as planned. But he had also expected a signing ceremony Friday. Difficulties bridging differences

over thorny issues such as the role of Islam and female representation in a new Iraqi parliament had already forced the council to miss a Saturday deadline to complete the

Roh gets impeachmen tultimatum

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

President Roh Moo-hvun has until today to apologise for violating the elections law or face impeachment, the opposition Millennium Democratic Party warned Friday.

But the pro-government Uri Party blasted the demand for an apology and promise to behave in the future as evidence the MLD is desperate for any tactic that would get it back on track before the April 15 general elections

Uri Leader Chung Dong-young lambasted the opposition parties for creating confusion in state affairs while "drifting into anachro-

"We are standing at the cross-roads to ascertain whether to overcome old forces in politics or lose out to them," Chung said at a party meeting.

Cheong Wa Dae officials had no comment but a day earlier expressed annoyance that the National Election Commission ruled Roh had violated the law that states public officials must remain neutral in elections.

His ongoing problems over alleged illegal campaigning esca-lated during a recent TV debate when he said he would do everything possible within the law to help Uri win.



Sri Lankan Liberation of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Political Leader S. P. Thamilselvan (L) speaks at a press conference in Kilinochchi yesterday to officially announce the expulsion of the group's renegade regional commander, V. Muralitharan, better known by his nom de guerre 'Karuna'. The LTTE discharged Karuna after he mounted a challenge to their leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

An Israeli military army vehicle drives in front of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's compound in the West Bank city of Ramallah Friday. More than 10 Israeli army jeeps and armored vehicles surrounded the Ramallah headquarters blocking the compound, known in Arabic as the 'Mukataa', the main entrance as well as southern and western access.

Suicide bombers, 2 cops killed in Gaza attacks

Two Palestinian policemen and two suicide bombers were killed and 20 other people wounded yesterday in an abortive twin attack with mock Israeli military between Israel and the Gaza Strip, a senior Palestinian security offi-

One vehicle apparently blew up prematurely near the Palestinian police checkpoint at the crossing while the other managed to get as far as the Israeli position before exploding, but caused no casualties apart from the driver, the official said.

The two vehicles used were "jeeps made up to look like Israeli military jeeps with Israeli army number plates," the official, who declined to be identified, said

men and civilians were among the

Israeli troops opened fire after the explosions, witnesses said.

Israeli military sources confirmed the first explosion near the Palestinian position, but said that in the second case the driver abandoned his vehicle and opened fire on the Israeli troops, who shot him dead.

Anonymous calls to journalists in Gaza City said the attacks were a joint operation by the military wings of the Islamist Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a group linked to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah.

Islamic Jihad and Hamas had vowed to avenge six of their militants killed in Israeli helicopter

strikes in the Gaza Strip on February 28 and March 3 respec-

All crossing points between Israel and the Palestinian territories have been closed since late Thursday for fear of attacks during the Jewish Purim festival being celebrated Sunday and Monday.

On February 26 an Israeli soldier was killed at the Erez crossing in a gun battle with two Palestinian militants, who were

That attack was claimed by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

On January 15 a Palestinian mother-of-two blew herself up at the crossing, killing four Israelis in the first such suicide operation by Hamas involving a woman.

Congress woos Bollywood stars for polls campaign

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New

Ending a drought, Bollywood glamour poured on India's main opposition Congress Friday evening when an array of film stars, including Zeenat Aman and Moushumi Chatterjee, rallied behind the party ahead of parliamentary polls

The impressive line-up of the stars also included former Miss Indias and actresses Celina Jaitley, Namrata Shirodkar, young actor Sharad Kapoor and comedian

Only Moushumi Chatterjee, the heroine of the eighties in Bengali and Hindi films, joined Congress by filling up the membership enrolment form while the other film personalities told media persons that they would only campaign for the party in the Moushumi, daughter-in-law of

late singer-music composer Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, said she would be happy to contest the polls from any part of the country--not only from her home state of West Bengal -- if Congress wants her to do

She, however, avoided a question if she would like to take on fierbrand Trinamool Congress Mamata Banerjee in Kolkata South parliamentary constituency.

The political grapevine has it that well-known social activist and actress Nafisa Ali is likely to be put up by Congress against Mamata in hat constituency. Moushumi said she joined

Congress because of its ideology and secular outlook.

children, pointed out that she was brought up in a secular mileu given the fact that her mother is a Brahmin and father a Muslim Asrani provided wholesome

Zeenat, mother of two teenaged

Zeenat Aman, another former

Miss India and a sizzling actress of the seventies who shot into fame

with her performance in Dev Anand-starrer film "Hare Rama Hare Krishna," said the Congress'

secular view attracted her to the

entertainment to the mediapersons at the Congress party headquarters when he concluded his speech by reciting a modified version of his famous dialogue from the superhit film "Sholay": "thode se idhar, thode se udhar aur baki sab Congress me (some on this side, some on that and the rest all to Congress)."

Koreas to open road, rail links this year

North and South Korea will open road and rail links this year to span the most heavily armed frontier in the world and connect the divided peninsula for the first time in more than 50 years, officials said yester-

The first road and rail link to be reestablished will connect the South Korean capital Seoul with the North's city of Sinuiju near the Chinese border and pass Kaesong City, where a joint industrial park is being built.

"The road between Seoul and North Korea will be completed by the end of June," Vice Finance and Economy Minister Kim Kwang-Rim said, announcing plans for the Seoul-Sinuiju road link passing through the western side of the

"And by the end of this year, the railway will also be completed so that a road and a railway across the inter-Korean border will be open to

traffic on a trial basis this year," he

Following a historic 2000 inter-Korean summit, the two Koreas have been building two sets of road and rail links. But construction has been delayed amid tensions over North Korea's nuclear weapons

The other road and railway link in the east is also yet to be completed. A makeshift, unpaved road was opened temporarily last year to take South Korean tourists to the North's scenic Mount Kumgang.

Kim headed the South Korean delegation in three-day inter-Korean economic talks that ended

The talks wrapped up with an agreement to allow South Korean firms to start operating this year in Kaesong industrial park near the

'Blame CIA, not me' about WMD: Chalabi

REUTERS, New York

Iraqi Governing Council member Ahmed Chalabi says he is tired of being blamed for misleading the United States about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and points the finger instead at the CIA in an interview with CBS's '60 Minutes" to be aired today.

Chalabi, who heads the Iraqi National Congress exile group and has close ties to the Bush administration, says the CIA should have done a better job analysing information received from defectors he steered their

"This is a ridiculous situation," says Chalabi, who still maintains that weapons of mass destruction will be found in Iraq.

Chalabi said the CIA knew defectors can be biased and that even the press was saying "'defectors have an ax to grind, don't

Nasa rover finds signs of water on Mars

REUTERS, Los Angeles

The Mars rover Spirit found the first indications that small amounts of water may have welled up in the soil of Gusev Crater where the rover landed in January, a Nasa scientist said

The finding comes three days after Nasa officials announced that Spirit's twin, Opportunity, had uncovered geologic evidence that its landing site on the other side of the Red Planet, the Meridiani Planum, once was covered with water. covered with water.

Scientists working with Spirit deduced that water formed small holes, or vugs, and left mineral deposits in a rock nicknamed Humphrey. The rover drilled a 2mm (0.85 inch) deep hole into Humphrey and examined its interior with instruments to determine its mineral composi-

"If we found this rock on Earth we would say this is a volcanic

rock that has had a little bit of fluid move through it either when it formed or shortly thereafter," Ray Arvidson, deputy lead scientist at Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, said on

Friday. "The best bet is that water was in the magma. I don't think it was a groundwater percolation but water that came up with the magma," he added.

The amount of water found at Gusev Crater -- a canyon the size of Connecticut that scientists believe is an ancient lake bed is by no means the gobs of water at Meridiani, but it again demonstrates that when rocks are made on Mars, fluids are involved.

Spirit, now in the 61st Martian day, or sol, of its mission, is making its way through a rock-strewn plain toward the Bonneville Crater, about 150 meters (500 ft)

Blair lacked 'critical thinking' over Iraq war, says Blix

British Prime Minister Tony Blair lacked "critical thinking" in the runup to the Iraq war, former UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix said in an interview published yesterday. Speaking from his home in Stockholm, Blix told the London-

based Guardian daily that he was not accusing Blair of bad faith in taking Britain to war, but added: What I am saying is there was a lack of critical thinking. The Guardian said that in extracts it published of Blix's memoirs, Blair emerged as a man con-

vinced "to the point of credulity" by intelligence reports of Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and as a leader fuelled by a religious enthusiasm to do battle with evil. Blix told the Guardian that it

had seemed at times Britain and the United States were acting like "witch doctors".

HRW decries abuse of Afghans by US forces

US military forces in Afghanistan have mistreated detainees, arbitrarily detained civilians and used excessive force in arrests of non-combatants, Human Rights Watch said in a new report released yesterday.

The rights watchdog said it concluded "the US-administered system of arrest and detention in Afghanistan exists outside of the rule of law." The United States has detention facilities at Bagram, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Asadabad military bases.

"The United States is setting a terrible example in Afghanistan on detention practices," said Brad Adams, executive director of the Asia division of Human Rights Watch. "Civilians are being held in a legal black hole -- with no tribu-

nals, no legal counsel, no family visits and no basic legal

And Washington has not responded adequately to questions about arrest and detention practices, the group charged.

It gave the example of three detainees it said were known to have died while in US custody, two at the Bagram airbase north of Kabul in December 2002 and one at Asadabad in June 2003. The first two deaths were ruled homicides by US military pathologists who performed autopsies on the two men, but US officials have yet to explain what happened to any of the three men, the group said.

"This stonewalling must stop," said Adams. "The United States is obligated to investigate allegations and prosecute those who have violated the law. There is no sign that serious investigations are taking place."

US troops move into Haiti rebel territory

Aristide supporters slam 'occupation'

AFP, Port-au-Prince

US troops in the international security force in Haiti moved for the first time Friday into cities taken by rebels whose insurrection forced Jean Bertrand Aristide to

quit as president and flee. While thousands of Aristide supporters staged a demonstration of support in the Haitian capital, the ex-president was again warned about his conduct in the Central African Republic.

But moves to restore order to

the country made new progress when a 'council of wise men' was named in Port-au-Prince to choose a new prime minister and government acceptable to the political opposition. The military stabilization efforts

Aristide rebels.

Make un-2

Sergeant Timothy Edwards, a spokesman for the US contingent.

He said the small teams would assess the needs of the Haitian national police in Cap Haitien and Gonaives, and determining the possible scope of any international roop deployments there. The rebellion was launched in Gonaives on February 5 and quickly spread. Cap Haitien, the

country's second largest city, fell to the rebels on February 22 a week before Aristide fled. It is still the base of rebel military commander Guy Philippe. In the capital, US and French troops joined Haitian police for a second day of patrols through the

streets to dissuade looters. They did not interfere with the large pro-Aristide, anti-US march from the presidential palace to the

moved into new territory when the US Marines sent missions to Gonaives and Cap-Haitien the US embassy and then to the port, northern stronghold of the antiwaving portraits of the expresident and revolutionary Che "There are US forces that are moving into other areas of Haiti to do security," said Marine Staff



A US Marine points his weapon as he mans a defensive position at the city's port after they took control over it Friday. Troops from France, US, Canada and Chile have arrived in Haiti where violence erupted after the February 29 resignation and flight into exile of former President Jean Bertrand Aristide. Thousands of supporters of expresident Aristide paraded through the streets of Port-au-Prince, chanting anti-American slogans and demand-

ing the return of the exiled former leader.