

Afghan blast kills 2 US soldiers

AP, Kabul

A roadside bomb hit an American Humvee in southeastern Afghanistan, killing two US soldiers and their Afghan interpreter, the American military said yesterday.

Another US soldier was reported injured in the blast on Saturday in Ghazni province, part of the rising cost of American operations supposed to prevent militants from disrupting historic Afghan elections.

The wounded soldier was in stable condition at the US base the southern city of Kandahar, a brief military statement said. The dead would not be identified until next of kin were informed, it said.

It was not immediately clear who carried out the bombing about 140 miles southwest of the capital, Kabul. But the area lies in a broad belt near Pakistan where suspected Taliban-led rebels regularly clash with US and Afghan troops.

The deaths bring to about 58 the number of American soldiers killed in action in Afghanistan since US forces entered the country in 2001 to drive the Taliban from power and attack its al-Qaeda allies.

Vajpayee faces I-Day death threat

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

An anonymous call threatening to assassinate Atal Behari Vajpayee on Independence Day sent the security agencies in the Capital into a tizzy Saturday.

Soon after the police control room received the call around 4:15 p.m, security cover of the former Prime Minister was tightened and a large number of police personnel were deployed outside his residence. The duration of the call was less than a minute.

Sources said a caller, who spoke in Hindi, only said: "15 August ko Vajpayeeji nahi rahengey (Mr Vajpayee will be assassinated on 15 August)". The police got a mobile phone number but they weren't able to trace it. As soon as the call was received, senior police officers and intelligence sleuths were informed on the wireless network of the Delhi Police.

Within the next few hours, Intelligence Bureau officials and a team of the Special Cell and a unit of New Delhi district police tried to trace from where the call originated.

One of the units of the Special Cell and Intelligence agencies are still trying to identify the caller.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis brandish their weapons and parts of a US military OH-58 Delta helicopter which made an emergency landing yesterday on the edge of Baghdad's Sadr City slum where clashes have raged over the past three days between US troops and militia loyal to radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr. US Major General Peter Chiarelli told reporters that both pilots were safe, adding that the helicopter was not attacked and that it was a "maintenance" issue.

Israel approves 300 new settlements in West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli government has secretly approved the construction of 300 new houses in one of the largest and most controversial of the West Bank settlements, the Maariv daily reported yesterday.

Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz signed permits allowing for the construction of the housing units on the western fringes of Ariel, which would be in contravention of the US-backed roadmap for peace plan, three months ago but the tenders have not yet been issued due to "diplomatic considerations."

The defense ministry would not comment on the report but the mayor of Ariel, Ron Nachman, told AFP that a new tranche of building work had been approved, without saying when, emphasising that it formed part of a wider "development plan" for 2,000 homes which was given the go-ahead several years ago.

Ariel, which is home to around 18,000 residents, lies some 20km to the

east of the internationally recognised boundary between Israel and the West Bank, the so-called Green Line.

The news emerged after Washington slapped the Israeli government on the wrist last week after it confirmed plans to build 600 new homes in Maale Adumin, the largest of the West Bank settlements.

Under the terms of the roadmap, Israel is obliged to freeze all settlement activity in the occupied territories.

The Israeli anti-settlement watchdog Peace Now said that Mofaz and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon "were acting like thieves" in the night and damaging the special relationship with the United States.

"The construction of hundreds of new housing blocks east of the Green Line is a death blow to the solution of two states for two people and damages any future attempt to reach a permanent agreement with the Palestinian people," it said in a statement.

"We call upon the government to stand by its commitments to the Israeli public and the world at large, to freeze

all plans of construction over the Green Line."

Meanwhile, Israeli authorities began distributing iodine anti-radiation tablets yesterday to thousands of residents living near the controversial Dimona nuclear reactor.

An army spokesman said that soldiers had begun delivering the Lugul tablets to homes and that a distribution center was also being opened under the supervision of health experts.

The tablets will be handed out in the towns of Yeroham, Dimona and Aruar, and other surrounding villages as well as to Bedouins living in the southern Negev desert close to the Dimona reactor.

The government announced back in June that it would distribute the tablets, which have been stored for the last 20 years, as a preventive measure.

It denied that there was any cause for concern about safety measures or levels of radiation, adding that similar precautions had been taken in other foreign countries.

UN offers to help broker ceasefire in Iraq

REUTERS, AFP, United Nations

The United Nations offered its help on Saturday to try to stop some of the worst fighting seen in Iraq in about four months between Shia militiamen and coalition forces.

The United Nations, which is helping Iraq prepare for a National Conference in mid-August, said in a statement that it "is ready to extend its facilitating role to the current crisis, if this would be helpful."

The statement said UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, urged that force be used only as a "last resort" and called "for every effort to be made, even at this late hour, to work out a cease-fire and peaceful solution."

"The United Nations is ready to extend its facilitating role to the current crisis, if this would be helpful," said the spokesman.

Although just a handful of UN staff are in Iraq -- a team of technical experts helping set up a national conference on Iraq's political future, and a security liaison team -- the world body has maintained contacts with many parties in Iraq.

It helped facilitate organisation of the interim government and is aiding Iraq's preparations for national elections next year. But it has not been involved in helping negotiate cease-fires between American-led coalition forces and Iraqi militants.

The statement added that Annan said he was "extremely concerned at the widespread fighting that has broken out in Iraq over the last several days, especially in the holy city of Najaf."

"He is particularly troubled by the high toll of dead and wounded, including civilian casualties."

In the past three days, US Marines said they had killed 300 militiamen loyal to Iraqi Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in Najaf. But the cleric said only 36 militiamen had been killed.

The United Nations welcomed Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's offer of a limited amnesty for insurgents and wider participation in the political process as steps in the right direction.

The new UN chief envoy for Iraq, veteran Pakistani diplomat Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, will go to Baghdad this month along with a small team to reestablish a permanent UN presence.

The world body at one point had some 600 international staff working in Iraq following the US-led invasion. All were pulled out last year after a bomb attack on UN offices in Baghdad.

Hundreds of UN staff are working on Iraqi projects from neighboring Jordan.

Sudan seeks Arab help to avert UN sanctions

REUTERS, Cairo

Sudan sought Arab help yesterday to head off possible sanctions threatened by the United Nations if Khartoum fails to rein in marauding militiamen accused of genocide and ethnic cleansing in its western Darfur region.

Sudan has about three weeks left to show the UN Security Council it is serious about disarming the Janjaweed militia or face possible sanctions. Darfur rebels says Khartoum backs Janjaweed attacks to drive non-Arab villagers off their land.

Sudan's Foreign Minister Mustafa Osman Ismail said Khartoum was seeking political support from Arab ministers, due to meet at the Arab League in Cairo, "which will lead to the halting of any attempts to target Sudan or issuing sanctions against it."

The Cairo-based Arab League has said the threat of sanctions will not help resolve the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, where the UN says fighting has killed 50,000, displaced one million and made two million short of food and medicine.

Iran & Iraq intensify war of words

AFP, Baghdad

A war of words between Iran and Iraq intensified yesterday, with the foreign ministry in Tehran now saying it was not prepared to discuss serious issues with Baghdad's interim authorities.

In the latest blow to relations, Iran's foreign ministry said Sunday it was summoning Iraq's top diplomat here over claims that four Iranian spies have been arrested in Baghdad.

"Today we are going to summon the Iraqi charge d'affaires to the Iranian foreign ministry, and we are going to ask him to give us proof," spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters.

"He should tell us whom they have arrested and if they have proof to give us," he added, saying Iraqi officials should also "stop creating a bad atmosphere" between Iran and Iraq.

On Saturday a spokesman for the Iraqi interior ministry said four Iranian intelligence officers had been arrested by Iraqi authorities on suspicion of spying and carrying out acts of sabotage in the country.

Asefi also snubbed a call from Iraq's interim Defence Minister Hazem al-Shaalan, who has been widely lambasted in the Iranian press, that Tehran immediately return Iraqi planes sent to

Iran before or during the 1991 Gulf War.

"We will discuss these (issues) with the coming elected government officials, and not with the interim government," Asefi said in what amounted to a major snub.

Iran has yet to formally recognise the Iraqi interim government, which has been described by Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as "lackeys" of the Americans.

Shaanan said in an interview with the Kuwaiti daily newspaper Al-Anbaa that Iran should send back 130 planes "now".

Tehran has insisted that it was holding only 22 Iraqi planes which Saddam Hussein's regime sent to Iran to avoid attacks by US-led forces liberating Kuwait and that it was ready to return them if asked by the United Nations.

Tensions between Iraq and Iran have mounted in recent weeks, after Shaalan told The Washington Post he had seen "clear interference in Iraqi issues by Iran" and accused Tehran of taking over some Iraqi border posts and sending spies and saboteurs into Iraq.

Iraq invasion a 'gift' to Laden: CIA analyst

AFP, Washington

The US invasion of Iraq was a "tremendous gift" to Osama bin Laden and a major setback in the struggle against al-Qaeda, according to a CIA terrorism expert who has written a scathing account of the conduct of the US "war on terror."

In an interview with AFP, the author of "Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror" blasted the efforts of successive US governments and the US intelligence community in fighting what he describes as a global Islamic insurgency.

"Anonymous," as he is known, painted a dismal picture of the situation in Iraq, a "very bleak" outlook for Afghanistan and advocated debate about US policies which he claimed are providing a fertile recruiting ground for al-Qaeda in the Muslim world.

A senior CIA analyst, "Anonymous" has been widely identified as the head of the bin Laden unit at the Central Intelligence Agency's Counterterrorist Center from 1996 to 1999. He was allowed to write the book on condition

he not reveal his identity. Published last month with an initial print run of 10,000 copies the provocative work, which was vetted by his employer for classified material, has climbed to number five on the New York Times list of non-fiction best-sellers.

It has gone back to the printers for another 200,000 copies and translations into nearly a dozen languages are planned. They include Arabic, French, Greek, Japanese and Turkish.

"Anonymous," a bearded, professorial man in his 50s, is blistering in his criticism of the US decision to invade Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein.

"It's a disaster," he said. "I'm not an expert at all on Saddam or WMD (weapons of mass destruction) or Iraq but as it factors into the war against al-Qaeda or al-Qaedaism it was a tremendous gift to bin Laden."

"It validated so many of the arguments he's made over the past decade," "Anonymous" said, particularly the claim by the Saudi-born al-Qaeda leader that the West seeks to occupy the Islamic holy places.

Australian Iraq policy under fire

BBC ONLINE

Several Australian former diplomats and defence chiefs have accused the government of misleading Australia over the reasons for going to war in Iraq.

In an open letter, the 43 signatories said the decision was based on false assumptions and deception.

They also said Australia's involvement in the war had raised its profile as a potential target of terrorism.

The government said that while there were intelligence failings it had not misused information in its possession.

In a similar statement in April, retired British diplomats criticised the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, for his support of what they described as doomed American policies in the Middle East.

The letter's signatories include former heads of the Australian Defence Force, former departmental heads and senior figures in the intelligence and diplomatic communities.

They demand an end to the Australian government's "rubber-stamping" of US policies and called for a more balanced approach.

TERROR HUNT IN WEST

S Asians blast 'racial harassment'

AFP, London

"It's about time they stopped laying the blame for terrorism at our door," said Anu, strolling out of a specialist grocery store, shelves packed with spices and vegetables, into the west London sunshine.

Referring to Tuesday's arrest of 13 suspected terrorist suspects, all reportedly of south Asian origin, retired teacher Anu was unhappy that ethnic minorities have once again been thrust into the glare of the media spotlight.

"We are talking about the arrests of a few individuals among thousands of British citizens of Asian descent, who are just getting on with their lives," he said.

What's more, he added, Britons of South Asian descent "are as worried about terrorism as any other ethnic group in this country".

Police said the 13 men, aged 19 to 32, were arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000 as part of an "intelligence-led operation," but have refused to confirm that at least one is a kingpin in Osama

bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

Two of the men have since been released without charge. The others can be detained for questioning through Sunday, unless a court-ordered extension is obtained.

Anu lives in Southall, a 15-minute train ride from London's Paddington station, a neighbourhood with thriving communities with roots in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Twenty-five percent of inhabitants of Ealing, the outer London borough that includes Southall, claim to be of south Asian origin, according to the 2001 national census.

Nationwide, five percent of the total population, or nearly 2.25 million, identified themselves as "(south) Asian or Asian British".

Anu was not the only one who objected to what is seen as a tendency by the news media in Britain to emphasise the Pakistani connection when it comes to confronting global terrorism.



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani auto-rickshaw driver transports his passengers through a flooded street in Lahore yesterday after a downpour flooded many streets of the eastern city. According to country's top weather expert, Pakistan is likely to get less rainfall than other South Asian countries during the current monsoon season as it is in the dry years of a climate cycle, which roughly spans 15 to 20 years.



PHOTO: AFP

Democratic Presidential Candidate John Kerry, running mate John Edwards and Kerry's wife Teresa raise their arms after delivering a speech in La Junta, Colorado Saturday.

Kerry to cut US troops in Iraq if elected

AFP, Washington

Democratic presidential contender John Kerry said he would be able to withdraw a significant amount of US troops from Iraq by August 2005 if he is elected in the November 2 election.

"I believe that within a year from now, we could significantly reduce American forces in Iraq, and that's my plan," Kerry said Friday in an interview with National Public Radio. "I believe we can."

Kerry said President George W. Bush, a Republican, "rushed to war without a plan to win the peace. He pushed our allies aside. We've lost our credibility with the world."

The Massachusetts senator said he would used diplomacy to build alliances in Iraq.

"You need to have more people involved in the process," Kerry said, according to a transcript of the interview released Saturday.

"We have not seen this administration do the statesmanship, do the diplomacy necessary, and America's paying a very high price, both in terms of the lives of our young and the money that's coming out of the taxpayers' pockets."

"I will do a better job of building those alliances and getting our troops home, and I will do a much better job of reducing the burden on the National Guard and reserves and their families, who are paying a very high price for the president's rush."

Iraqi security forces could take over a large part of the country's security if they receive training from other countries, he said.

Kerry also suggested that the United States should play a larger role in Sudan's war-torn western region of Darfur, where up to 50,000 people are believed to have died in clashes between government-backed Arab militias and local rebels.