

US launches new operation to force Taliban surrender

AFP, Kabul
The US-led military in Afghanistan has kicked off a new operation to hunt Taliban militants in their winter stronghold and force them to accept an Afghan government reconciliation offer, a US military spokesman said Saturday.
The operation, dubbed "Lightning Freedom" and involving the entire 18,000 strong US-led force, began after President Hamid Karzai was sworn in Tuesday as the country's first ever elected head of state. Major Mark McCann told reporters at a regular news briefing in Kabul.
McCann said the US military aimed to hunt down hardcore Islamic militants and pressure more moderate Taliban members to accept an arms-for-amnesty offer from the government.
"The first thing obviously is to facilitate the entire reconciliation process to get these folks to come to the realisation that it is better to become part of the peaceful process than not," he said.

New US security chief pulls out

AP, Washington
Bernard Kerik, New York City's former top cop, withdrew his name from consideration to be President Bush's homeland security secretary, a victim of the embarrassing "nanny problem" that has killed the nominations of other prominent officials.
The surprise move late Friday sends Bush back in search of a Cabinet official to help guard the nation against another terrorist attack.
While assembling paperwork for his Senate confirmation, Kerik said he uncovered questions about the immigration status of a housekeeper-nanny that he employed. As homeland security secretary, Kerik would oversee the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.
"I am convinced that, for personal reasons, moving forward would not be in the best interests of your administration, the Department of Homeland Security or the American people," Kerik said in a letter to Bush.
He said he could not allow personal matters "distract from the focus and progress of the Department of Homeland Security and its crucial endeavors."
Kerik the bald, mustachioed former New York City police commissioner was among a small cadre of leaders who became the face of the response to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, often directing Manhattan's response alongside of then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.
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made up of more than 180,000 employees from 22 federal agencies.
Democrats also were focusing on Kerik's recent windfall, which he made by exercising stock options in a stun gun company that does business with the Department of Homeland Security.
Kerik's announcement marked an unusual disruption in the White House's normally well-choreographed personnel moves. But he is not the first prominent government official to fall victim to the "nanny problem."
Similar issues killed the nominations of three candidates for top administration posts in the Clinton administration. That includes his first choice to be attorney general, Zoe Baird, who was forced to withdraw her name from consideration after the disclosure she had not paid Social Security taxes for a housekeeper, an illegal immigrant.



PHOTO: AFP
A villager cuts a log along debris covered shore of Real town yesterday. Deadly flash flood and landslide carrying debris of logs rampaged over several towns in Quezon province during a storm covering villages, roads and shoreline. More than 1,600 were killed while others missing following the back to back storm that hit the northeastern Philippines.

Hunt for survivors called off in Philippines

AFP, Manila
Rescuers ended their search for survivors in the ruins of a collapsed building in the storm-ravaged northeastern Philippines Saturday after concluding there is no one left alive.
Military officers overseeing the operation and mining engineers who headed a special rescue unit met with local officials Saturday near the site of the fallen building to give them the grim news.
Local officials reluctantly accepted the news despite the discovery Thursday of four people still alive after being buried in the rubble of the two-storey Repador building for 11 days.
"They have already accepted that," said local military commander Captain Gerry Sultan, adding "there is no sign of people still alive."

97,000 Chinese died in road accidents this year so far

AFP, Beijing
Almost 97,000 people were killed on China's roads in the first 11 months of this year, a 1.5 percent increase on the same period last year, state media reported Saturday.
Some 96,870 people were killed and 435,740 injured in more than 470,000 accidents recorded between January and November, Xinhua news agency quoted the Ministry of Public Security as saying.
While the death toll was up, the number of injured dropped 4.7 percent, according to ministry statistics. Total road accidents were down 23.9 percent, Xinhua said.
The report said the 54 worst accidents, which killed more than 10 people each, accounted for 838 of the deaths.
Lax enforcement of road safety rules, poor vehicle maintenance and inexperienced drivers make Chinese roads among the most dangerous in the world.

Another Guantanamo detainee claims abuse

AFP, London
A Briton held at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba claims he was subjected to abuse and humiliation, echoing torture accounts from other British nationals held there, the Guardian reported Saturday.
Martin Mubanga claimed he was kept shackled for so long that he urinated on himself, and then was forced to clean up the mess, that an interrogator stood on his hair and that he was subjected to extreme temperatures, according to the newspaper.
Mubanga, a 31-year-old from London, was quoted in a Foreign Office document prepared for his family, following a British official's visit to the detention center in early October.
The official said that during the hour-long visit, Mubanga was kept "shackled to the ring in the floor",

according to the document.
The detainee, arrested in Zambia, has been held for more than two years in the US detention center. Most of the 550 detainees there are suspected Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants rounded up during military operations in Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks in 2001.
Another British detainee, Moazzam Begg, a 36-year-old arrested in 2002 in Pakistan, claimed in October he was subjected to "vindictive torture" and death threats, and that he had witnessed the deaths of two fellow detainees "at the hands of US military personnel".
Four of five Britons released from Guantanamo last March have filed a lawsuit in Washington seeking damages from US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other top officials for alleged torture and abuse.
The Foreign Office said it had raised Mubanga's allegations with US authorities and that "their response is that they are without merit," the Guardian quoted a spokeswoman as saying.
"At this stage we would not propose to pursue this further," she said.

Nobel winner Maathai sounds alarm over planet

REUTERS, Oslo
Calling humanity a threat to the planet, Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai urged democratic reform and an end to corporate greed after becoming the first African woman to collect the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday.
She said sweeping changes were needed to restore a "world of beauty and wonder" by overcoming challenges ranging from AIDS to climate instability.
Maathai founded a campaign that has planted 30 million trees across Africa in a bid to slow deforestation.
"Activities that devastate the environment and societies continue unabated," Maathai, Kenya's deputy environment minister, said in a Nobel acceptance speech at a glittering ceremony in Oslo City Hall.
"I call on leaders, especially in Africa, to expand democratic space and build fair and just societies," she said.

Berlusconi cleared of corruption

BBC NEWS ONLINE
Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has been cleared of corruption after a four-year trial. Berlusconi had been accused of bribing judges in the 1980s to favour his business interests.
He was acquitted on one count - on the other judges in Milan ruled that the alleged offence happened too long ago for charges to be pressed. Berlusconi, who was not in court for the verdict, said the decision was "better late than never". He is the first serving Italian prime minister to have been tried in a criminal court.
He accuses judges of conducting a politically-motivated witch-hunt against him. The accusations had related to the billionaire's business activities before he entered politics, when he made a fortune in property and television.
Berlusconi, 68, was acquitted of a charge that he had bribed judges in connection with the sale in the 1980s of the SME state food conglomerate.
The panel of three judges ruled that the second charge - dating back to 1991 - had lapsed under Italy's statute of limitations, which was halved in this case from its usual 15-year period.
The defence team said it would appeal on the second ruling, saying it wanted a clear verdict of innocence.
An opposition politician and former top anti-corruption magistrate said the lack of a firm acquittal on the second charge meant Berlusconi did not have the moral stature to be prime minister.
"The statute of limitations is not a declaration of innocence but it presumes guilt," said Antonio di Pietro.
One of Berlusconi's lawyers, Niccolò Ghedini, said: "It's a verdict which is largely satisfactory, which brings to an end a 10-year case which has been shown to be substantially useless."
The BBC's David Willey in Rome says that although acquittal through the statute of limitations is not the same as a not guilty verdict, Berlusconi's unbounded political confidence is unlikely to be shaken.
State prosecutors had demanded an eight-year jail term, had Berlusconi been found guilty.
Next week, Berlusconi is due to visit Washington for talks with US President George W. Bush, a close ally.
Berlusconi only attended court three times during the four-year legal process, saying his responsibilities as prime minister left him no time.

Alleged kidnap mastermind arrested in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad
Pakistani security forces have arrested an Afghan militant leader who allegedly masterminded the month-long kidnap ordeal of three UN workers, officials said Saturday.
Syed Mohammad Akbar Agha, head of Jaishul Muslimeen (Army of Muslims), was captured in a raid in the southern port city of Karachi, Information Minister Sheikh Rashid told AFP without giving details.
"Agha was arrested from a flat in central Karachi early last week," a senior security official said, adding that he "put up no resistance when the security forces raided his flat".
The official said efforts were under way to arrest some of Agha's accomplices. The minister said no decision had been taken on whether to hand Agha over to Kabul.
The Jaish claimed the abduction of Shqipe Hebibi from Kosovo, Annetta Flanagan of Northern Ireland and Filipino diplomat Angelito Nayan from a busy Kabul street on October 28.
The trio, who were overseeing Afghanistan's first presidential elections in October, were released unharmed on November 23 after prolonged negotiations with the Afghan government.

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Change of Date and Venue of 6th AGM
Due to unavoidable circumstances the date of the AGM has been shifted from 26th December 2004 to 30th December 2004. The venue of the AGM will be Hotel Sundarban, 1/D, Free School Street, Sonargaon Road, Dhaka instead of Meeting Room-1, IDB Bhaban, Agargaon, Dhaka.
Time and agenda of AGM remain the same as per the previous notice.
All distinguished members are requested to attend.
Forkan Bin Quasem
Secretary General

SAMReN Fellowship for Young Academics and Professionals
South Asia Migration Resource Network (SAMReN) offers fellowships to young South Asian academics and researchers to conduct empirical research. The aim of this initiative is to generate knowledge and understanding on migration and development and increase capacity of young professionals and academics.
Proposals will be accepted on all issues of migration within and from South Asia. An amount of BDT100,000/= (Taka one lakh only) is offered for each fellowship.
The Fellowship will involve work for 3 months that may be spread over 6 months. Nationals of South Asian countries will be given preference, however those working on South Asian migration are also eligible to apply.
Application details and forms are available from the Project Director, South Asia Migration Resource Network (SAMReN), Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), 3/3 E, Bijnayagar (4th Floor), Dhaka 1000. Tel: 880-2-9360338, Fax: 880-2-8362441, E-mail: rmmrubj@aitbd.net. For further details and online application method please visit the SAMReN website www.samren.org.
All application should be dispatched by 15 January 2005; only short-listed candidates will be invited for an interview.

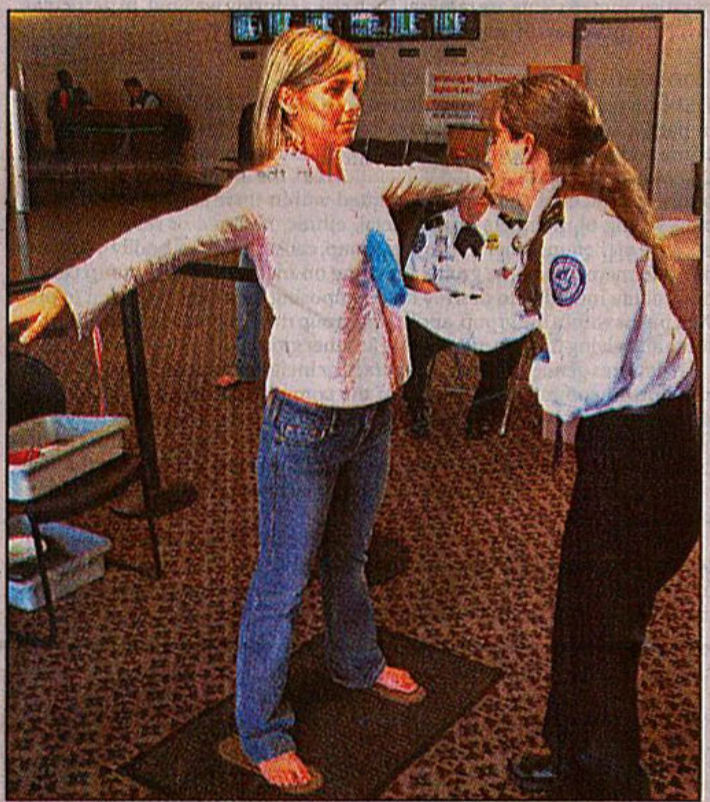


PHOTO: AFP
A Transportation Security Administration agent performs a patdown check on an airline passenger at a security checkpoint in terminal four at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport on Friday in Phoenix, Arizona. Beginning 13 December passengers will be allowed to stand normally with arms at their sides during the last part of the security check.

'Opposition in Ukraine got money from US'

AP, Washington
It's been alleged that the Bush administration has spent more than \$65 million in the past two years to aid political organisations in Ukraine, paying to bring opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko to meet US leaders and helping to underwrite exit polls indicating he won last month's disputed runoff election.
US officials say the activities don't amount to interference in Ukraine's election, as Russian President Vladimir Putin alleges, but are part of the \$1 billion the State Department spends each year trying to build democracy worldwide.
No US money was sent directly to Ukrainian political parties, the officials say. In most cases, it was funneled through organizations like the Carnegie Foundation or through groups aligned with Republicans and Democrats that organized election training, with human rights forums or with independent news outlets.

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