

Pak drive 'vastly reduced' al-Qaeda danger: Kasuri

Pakistan, Australia to ink counter-terror accord, Libbi won't be handed over to US

AFP, REUTERS, Canberra

The Pakistani army's drive against al-Qaeda has paralysed its communications network and "vastly reduced" its capacity for terrorism, Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri said yesterday.

He was speaking after a meeting with his Australian counterpart Alexander Downer, who announced the two nations would sign an agreement to improve counter-terrorist cooperation when Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf visits next month.

Kasuri said Pakistan was trying

to clean up after the 1979-89 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, when people from all over the Islamic world flocked to fight the invaders.

"The top (al-Qaeda) people are all foreigners. They were brought in during the Cold War after the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. But they stayed behind," he said.

"We have to clean up the mess," Kasuri told a joint press conference.

Asked about the prospects of catching Osama bin Laden, Kasuri said that if the al-Qaeda chief was still alive he was assumed to be continually on the move between the tribal areas of Pakistan and

Afghanistan.

"The second assessment, and a fair one, would be that he would not be moving with a large group of people, otherwise he'd be detected."

This showed that Pakistani army operations in tribal border areas "have effectively paralysed the communications network of al-Qaeda, both horizontally and vertically."

Meanwhile, Pakistan will not hand over a top al-Qaeda member it captured last week to the United States, Pak Foreign Minister said yesterday.

US agents and Pakistani authori-

ties have been jointly interrogating Abu Faraj al-Libbi, described by US officials as the al-Qaeda No. 3, who they hope could help them trace Osama bin Laden or his deputy Ayman al-Zawahri.

"At the moment we are questioning him. He was involved in two attempts on President Pervez Musharraf, so we have a very strong vested interest," Kasuri told a joint news conference with Australia's Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer.

Govt asks Nepalese to submit personal details

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal yesterday asked all its citizens to supply full personal details along with those of relatives and domestic workers in the wake of King Gyanendra's seizure of power in February.

"The home ministry has asked for personal details, including a photograph of all landlords, tenants, relatives and domestic workers living in the country, by June 14," an announcement broadcast on state-run radio said.

The announcement gave no reason for the request but it followed Gyanendra's takeover on February 1, a move he said was necessary to end an increasingly bloody Maoist insurgency in the impoverished Himalayan kingdom of 27 million people.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese students hold flaming torches as they shout anti-monarchy slogans during a demonstration at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu Thursday. The demonstrators are protesting against the assumption of power by King Gyanendra and demand the restoration of democracy in the country.

Lanka vows no return to war amid donors' fear

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka vowed yesterday the country would not return to war despite a deadlock in peace talks and failure to strike a deal with Tamil rebels on tsunami relief ahead of a key review of foreign aid.

Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama said all parties in the ruling coalition as well as the main opposition were convinced that "war is not a solution."

"Every single major party is committed to peace," Amunugama

told reporters in Colombo. "All clearly state there is no alternative to peace."

Sri Lanka is to host a two-day meeting of international aid donors in the central town of Kandy starting Monday amid the failure so far of diplomatic efforts to break an impasse in peace talks between Colombo and Tiger rebels.

International donors had said 4.5 billion dollars in aid pledged to rebuild Sri Lanka in June 2003 was linked to progress in the Norwegian-led peace

process. Peace negotiations have been on hold since April 2003.

"We're optimistic progress can be made in the peace process," said Peter Harrold, the World Bank's country director for Sri Lanka. "And we're willing to help in anyway we can to help the parties make progress."

Diplomatic sources said donors were worried about the peace talks stalemate and escalation of targeted killings, particularly in the troubled eastern province.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan students from Kabul University shout slogans as they burn a US flag during a protest in Kabul Thursday. Some 200-300 university students demonstrated against the alleged desecration of the holy Quran at the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay, taking to the streets of the Afghan capital in a third day of protests across the country which have left seven people dead.

Foreigners flee as Afghan protests spread

3 more people killed in riot over Quran desecration

AFP, Jalalabad

International aid agencies evacuated workers from a riot-hit city in eastern Afghanistan as protests at the alleged defilement of the Quran by US soldiers moved to Kabul and also across the country, officials said yesterday.

Witnesses said the situation remained tense in Jalalabad, where four people died Wednesday while three more people were killed in eastern Afghanistan yesterday in protests against the alleged US abuse of the Quran, raising the death toll from three days of unrest to seven, officials said.

Two people were killed during demonstrations in Khogyani, a town just northwest of Jalalabad, deputy governor of Nangarhar province Mohammad Asif Qazizada told AFP. Four people died in Jalalabad on Wednesday.

"Two demonstrators died and one was seriously injured in Khogyani district today after armed

protestors opened fire at police," Qazizada said.

The other person died in Chak district of Wardak province, interior ministry spokesman Lutfullah Mashal said.

"Demonstrators attacked the Chak district police headquarters and set fire to its weapons stock. The explosion killed one demonstrator and wounded four others," said Mashal.

The demonstrations have now spread to 10 provinces in Afghanistan, with total casualties of at least seven dead and 76 injured, he added.

On Thursday there were repeated demonstrations in the capital Kabul as well as the provinces of Nangarhar, Parwan, Kapisa, Takhar and Logar.

Two people were wounded when security forces opened fire on a gathering of 100 villagers early yesterday in Khogyani, a district just northwest of the city, provincial spokesman Faizan Ul-Haq told AFP.

Afghan troops and police cleared roadblocks set up by several groups of

between 100 and 200 people just outside Jalalabad along the highway towards the Pakistani border, border police sergeant Mohammed Nabisi said.

Vehicles belonging to the fledgling national army were stoned by small groups of demonstrators and an AFP reporter also head gunshots, but saw no casualties.

Jalalabad city centre was quiet and shops were open but it looked like a warzone, with broken glass as well as burnt tires and wood littered everywhere, an AFP reporter witnessed. Some shopkeepers were repairing their premises.

However students took to the streets of the capital yesterday in a third day of protests sparked by allegations in Newsweek magazine that interrogators at the US military detention centre in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, desecrated the Quran by stuffing it down a toilet to rattle Muslim prisoners.

Work on Baglihar Dam goes on despite World Bank intervention

AFP, Srinagar

Building of a controversial power project in Indian Kashmir will continue despite opposition by Pakistan and the appointment of a neutral expert by the World Bank to sort things out, officials say.

Pakistan, which fears the one-billion-dollar project could deprive its wheat-bowl state of Punjab of vital irrigation water, charges that the plant violates a 44-year-old water sharing treaty.

But Indian Kashmir officials say the 450-megawatt Baglihar project on the Chenab River in south Kashmir does not contravene the pact and could go a long way to ending routine 12-hour blackouts plaguing the Himalayan state.

"The work on the project is continuing as we are not doing anything outside the parameters of the treaty," a senior state official told AFP.

The row over the Baglihar Dam has been an irritant in the ongoing peace process between the South Asian nuclear rivals who have fought three wars, two over the disputed region of Kashmir which

both hold in part but claim in full.

The announcement by the World Bank came Tuesday after the two countries ended three days of talks in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore with no accord on the Baglihar dam.

But Jamaat Ali Shah, head of the Pakistani team, said the dam's design would be "further discussed in New Delhi" at the end of May.

Pakistan says it never approved the project's design as stipulated under the Indus Water Treaty and raised the issue with the World Bank, which brokered the agreement.

The World Bank named a Swiss national, Raymond Lafitte, as a neutral expert to "address differences" over the project between India and Pakistan, the Bank's website said Tuesday. Lafitte is a civil engineer and professor at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne.

"(Lafitte) will be asked to make a finding on a 'difference' between the two governments concerning the construction of the Baglihar project," it said.

Grenade attack outside Kashmir school: 2 die

AFP, Srinagar

Two women died and at least 50 people, including 20 children, were hurt yesterday in a grenade attack by Islamic rebels outside a missionary school in Indian Kashmir's summer capital, police said.

The blast near the school in Srinagar's commercial heart was the second rebel attack in two days in the city, the urban centre of a 15-year revolt against Indian rule.

"Two women have died of their injuries in hospital and at least 50 people, of whom 20 are school children, have been hurt in the grenade attack by rebels," said a police spokesman.

Doctors, who appealed for blood donations, said at least two victims were in critical condition.

On Wednesday, two people were killed and 34 injured when rebels detonated a powerful car bomb in another busy commercial area of Srinagar.

Lankan law on religious conversion a threat to minorities: UN

AFP, Colombo

A top UN official said yesterday religious minorities in predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka could be persecuted under proposed laws aimed at stopping faith conversions.

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, said there had been increased attacks against churches and the authorities had failed to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Two bills before Sri Lanka's parliament that propose to outlaw what are called "unethical religious conversions" were a threat to religious freedom in Sri Lanka, Jahangir told reporters.

"In my opinion, the provisions of both draft bills could result in the persecution of religious minorities

rather than the protection and promotion of religious tolerance," she said.

"The enactment of these bills could seriously undermine the culture of religious tolerance enjoyed for decades in this country."

The all-monk National Heritage party, which won nine seats in the 225-member assembly and is a member of the opposition, introduced an anti-conversion bill last year. The coalition government led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga too presented a similar bill.

A National Heritage party spokesman said their intention was to outlaw unethical conversion by offering cash and other inducements, especially to the rural poor, if they seek to change from Buddhism or Hinduism to Christianity.