

US, Afghan forces ring 4 Taliban commanders

132 militants killed in 3 days of fighting

AFP, Kabul

Afghan and US forces have killed 132 Taliban militants and surrounded four of the ousted regime's top commanders after a three-day battle in the south of the country, officials said yesterday.

The brother-in-law of fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar is one of the key figures under siege in a mountain hideout, the Afghan defence ministry said. The claim could not be independently confirmed.

"One-hundred-and-thirty-two Taliban were killed," in the operation in a restive area on the borders of Kandahar, Zabul and Uruzgan provinces, defence ministry spokesman Mohammed Nu'man Atif said.

"If you look at the number of the men they've lost we can say that their backbone is broken," Atif

added. "It has been a great, great success for the government."

Thirty-two rebels were killed when the offensive began early Tuesday and a further 100 insurgents were killed later Tuesday and in the early hours of Wednesday morning in Mian Nisheen district, the spokesman said.

Most of the militant deaths occurred when US warplanes armed with laser-guided bombs and supported by British aircraft pounded suspected Taliban safe havens, US and Afghan officials said.

Around 200 Afghan police and many more Afghan and US-led coalition troops were hunting down surviving pockets of rebels hiding out in valleys in the "black triangle" — named after the Taliban's distinctive black turbans.

Four Taliban commanders including Mullah Brader, who is

related by marriage to the one-eyed Mullah Omar and is also said to be the militia's current deputy, have been ringed by government forces north of Mian Nisheen, Atif said.

Afghan officials described the onslaught as an attempt to curb a strong resurgence by the fundamentalist Islamic militia before important parliamentary elections in less than three months' time.

Three Afghan policemen were also killed in the operation, Kandahar province police chief Mohammed Ayoub Salangi told AFP. The US military has said that five American soldiers were wounded.

"The Afghan national police are the lead on this. We are supporting what they are doing," said US military spokeswoman Lieutenant Cindy Moore.

A US Air Force U-2 spy plane returning from a mission over

Afghanistan crashed during landing late Tuesday at an air base in the United Arab Emirates, according to reports in the Arab sheikhdom and the US military.

The US military would not reveal if the mission was linked to the operation in Afghanistan.

British military spokeswoman Lieutenant Gemma Fullman said British planes equipped with air-to-surface missiles provided close air support during the operation in southern Afghanistan but did not drop any munitions.

The Taliban's usual spokesman was not immediately available to comment.

Many of the rebels targeted by the offensive are thought to have taken part in a daring raid last week on Mian Nisheen in which the rebels took 31 people hostage.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C), former prime minister A.B. Vajpayee (L) and Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) president L.K. Advani attend a condolence meeting to pay homage to the late vice-president of the BJP Sunder Singh Bhandari at the BJP head-quarters in New Delhi Wednesday. Bhandari, (84), passed away in his sleep early Monday morning.

Chhattisgarh villagers turn against Maoists: 10 killed

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Raipur

At least 10 people have been killed as villagers in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region have turned against Maoist guerrillas, accusing them of blocking development work.

According to officials, angry villagers killed three guerrillas of the Communist Party of India-Maoist in the past week. The rebels in turn killed seven villagers.

The villagers have reportedly accused the guerrillas of committing acts that have pushed the poor to the verge of starvation.

The unprecedented development has no doubt pleased the state administration. It is the first such showdown between the Maoists and villagers, who are otherwise considered the backbone of the Maoist movement.

"It is surprising and pleasant that villagers have realised that development activity suffers heavily in rural belts because of Maoist ultras," Home Minister Ramvihar Netam said.

"We completely back the people and are ready to provide all support to them to weed out Maoism," he added.

Asia heat wave toll hits 390

AP, New Delhi

A blistering heat wave has been blamed for at least 390 deaths across India and Pakistan, but officials said yesterday that monsoon rains could bring relief next week.

At least seven people, including two women, collapsed and died in New Delhi on Wednesday as temperatures here reached a sauna-like 113 degrees Fahrenheit. That and another 16 deaths elsewhere in India brought the number of deaths from the heat wave to more than 300 over the past two months, officials said.

In neighbouring Pakistan, residents sweated in 118 degree weather. The heat left more than 60 people dead this week. In Bangladesh 32 people have died.

Meteorologists said temperatures in India were unusually high for June, at least 10 degrees above the normal range for the month.

Hot weather was found elsewhere in Asia, too. In fast developing China, some residents put their new prosperity to use by flicking on air conditioning units. Power use in Beijing hit a record high as temperatures there passed 108 degrees, reports said Thursday.



Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse (L) talks with India's former prime minister Inder Kumar Gujral in Colombo yesterday. The former Indian premier is in Sri Lanka to support a campaign on AIDS prevention.

Parents fail to claim freed Pak camel jockeys

AFP, Lahore

They have finally returned home from a brutal life in the United Arab Emirates, but 22 Pakistani children who worked as camel jockeys have still not been claimed by their parents.

The youngsters aged between six and 17 who flew into the eastern city of Lahore Tuesday were the first to be repatriated under an agreement between the United Nations Children's fund Unicef and the governments of Pakistan and the Gulf sheikhdom.

However, there were no family members there to welcome the children after their absences of two to seven years, and a Pakistani court had no choice but to order Wednesday that they be kept in a protection centre.

"None of the parents or guardians approached us to get their kids back," the centre's manager Shazia Ijaz said as the children sat in the city's Child Protection Court and stared the judge.

Pak sex workers in India to learn about HIV prevention

AFP, Kolkata

Pakistani sex workers have toured the brothel district of the eastern Indian city of Kolkata for tips on how to organise and to protect themselves against HIV/Aids, a spokeswoman for a local sex workers' union said Wednesday.

"It was the first time that a delegation of Pakistani sex workers visited an Indian red light district," said Swapna Gayen, president of the Committee for Coordination of Indomitable Women in the Sonagachi district of the city.

"They came here to know about our anti-Aids programme and brothel management," she said.

The 6,000 brothel-based sex workers of Sonagachi organised a union more than a decade ago for protection from customers who refuse to use condoms and to fight police harassment.

US spyplane crashes after Afghan mission

Pilot killed

REUTERS, Washington

The pilot of a US Air Force U-2 spy plane was killed on Wednesday when the plane crashed after a reconnaissance mission over Afghanistan, the US military said.

"The aircraft had completed its mission and was returning to base when the crash occurred," Air Force Capt. David Small, a spokesman for the US Central Command Air Forces, or CENTAF, said by telephone from the Gulf region.

Small refused to say where the U-2, which was based with the 380th US Air Expeditionary Wing in the United Arab Emirates, had crashed but added that the incident was under investigation. The jet went down at 7:30 p.m. EST Tuesday, which was Wednesday in the Asia region.

Small said U-2s had been flying

daily over Iraq and Afghanistan in support of US and allied forces fighting in the two countries.

The United Arab Emirates news agency WAM said the aircraft crashed while trying to land at one of its military bases, and that the UAE was helping in the investigation being conducted by the US military.

The agency said the US had an agreement with the UAE that allowed it to use some of its military facilities.

The single-seat, high-altitude reconnaissance and surveillance plane, a veteran of the Cold War with the former Soviet Union, is unnamed but flies at altitudes that make it impervious to many ground-fired weapons.

CENTAF is the air arm of the US Central Command, which is responsible for US military operations in the Gulf, Middle East and parts of Asia.

Indian crime reporter held over car thefts, burglaries

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian crime reporter who allegedly used his journalistic contacts to move stolen goods has been arrested over a spate of car thefts and burglaries, press reports said yesterday.

Sanjay Kumar Singh, 42, a reporter for newspapers in India's lawless Bihar state, was being held with three accomplices for allegedly stealing 56 cars and breaking into about 20 homes, newspapers said.

The journalist, who also holds a doctorate in child psychology, allegedly used his contacts to sell the cars and other stolen goods.

The four suspects were picked up in the national capital New Delhi, where they were allegedly planning more car thefts, the Pioneer newspaper said.

Lanka set to enter aid deal with Tigers

Marxists warn of protests

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is on the verge of clinching a deal with Tamil Tiger rebels on sharing foreign aid for post-tsunami reconstruction, official sources said yesterday, as Norway kept up shuttle diplomacy to save the faltering peace process.

Sources close to the government said the deal, seen as a prelude to saving Sri Lanka's peace bid, would "most likely" be signed today.

Norwegian diplomats here, meanwhile, made an unscheduled visit to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi Thursday, a day after the guerrillas said that their talks with Oslo's deputy foreign minister Vidar Helgesen brought no results.

Details of the sudden visit by Norwegian diplomats were not immediately known but it came as a

senior minister, Maithripala Sirisena, told parliament that the proposed joint mechanism with the Tigers will be debated in parliament Friday.

The government's Marxist ally, the JVP or People's Liberation Front, said it will launch peaceful demonstrations across the country from Friday to block the implementation of the joint mechanism.

The JVP quit the coalition government last week in protest but has not joined other opposition parties to bring the administration down.

"We will mobilise, students, workers and intellectuals to stage peaceful demonstrations until we block the joint mechanism," JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe told reporters here.

He said they were told in parliament Thursday that the controversial deal will be signed by the government

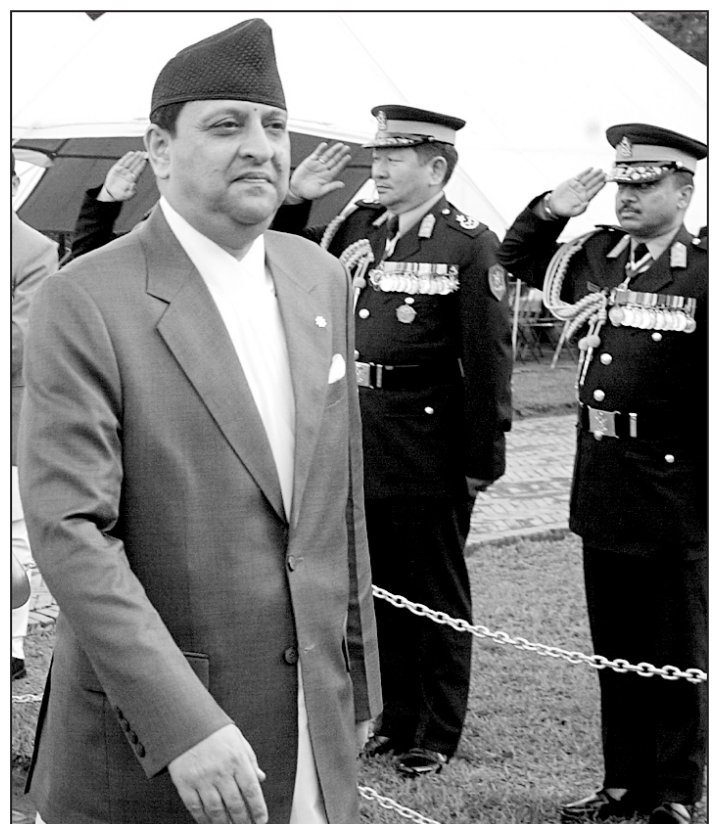
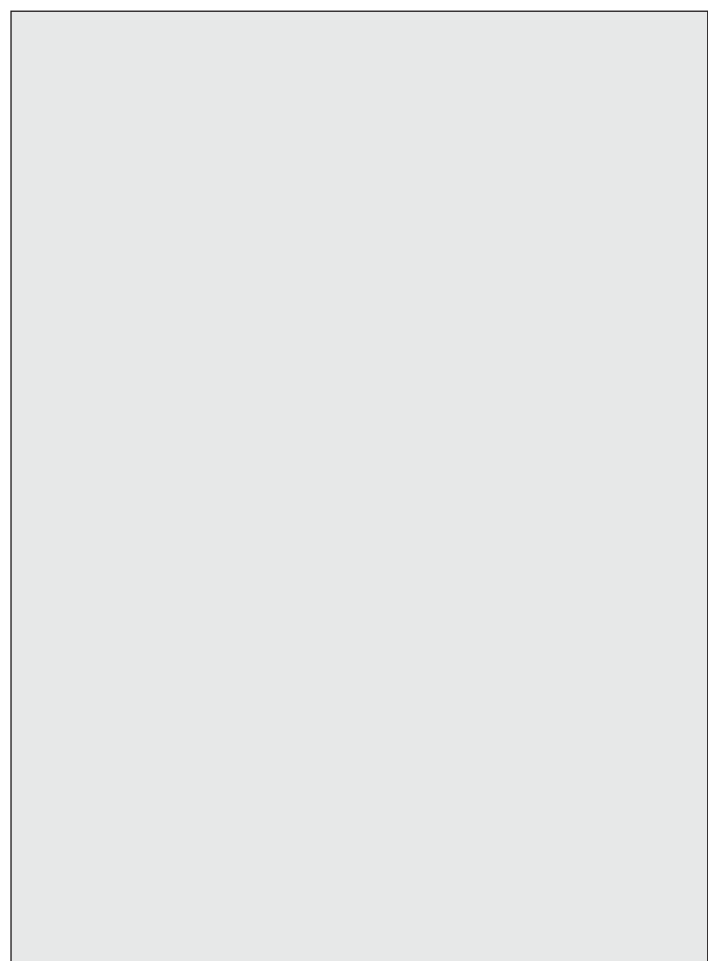
Friday despite their protests.

"From tomorrow there will be a new political equation in the country," Amarasinghe said.

Minister Sirisena said the joint mechanism will be discussed in parliament Friday as an "adjournment debate", which means there will be no vote on it and the discussion will remain only a matter of academic interest.

Norway's Helgesen held 90 minutes of talks with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan on the joint mechanism, but there was no announcement on any deal.

Thamilselvan told reporters that Wednesday's meeting failed to make any progress towards establishing the mechanism demanded by the international donors to release large amounts of aid for tsunami survivors.



King Gyanendra (L) of Nepal is saluted by Nepalese police officers at Tribhuvan International Airport upon his return to Kathmandu on Wednesday. King Gyanendra and Queen Komal returned home from the State of Qatar after attending the Second South Summit of the Group of 77.

Nepali writer seeks to unravel woes of homeland

AFP, New Delhi

Writer Manjushree Thapa was only 21 when she returned to her Nepalese homeland after attending college in the United States and found herself in the midst of the heady "Spring Awakening of 1990".

The kingdom was in ferment, about to undergo a revolution that would end a despotic monarchy and bring in multi-party democracy.

Now, 15 years on, to Thapa's distress, Nepal is again under absolute rule after King Gyanendra's seizure of power in February.

Thapa has written a gossipy primer — "An Elegy for Democracy, Forget Kathmandu" — to Nepal's tortured past and present that reviewers have praised as one of the most readable accounts of the country's confused politics.

"We already have had generations of struggle for democracy. Now another generation has been lost that will have to fight to claim back democracy," she says in an interview with AFP at a New Delhi coffee house.

Thapa, who normally lives in

Kathmandu, is staying in New Delhi for the time being and she says she does not know when she will return to her country.

She says she does not "feel personally targeted" in Nepal. But she says she does not want to live with "the level of fear" existing now in Nepal where journalists, politicians and other critics of the king's rule are regularly rounded up.

Thapa says she wrote the book to find out what has gone wrong with Nepal, which foreigners often regard as a Shangri-La paradise for hippies and trekkers.

"It isn't easy for a Nepali to trace what has gone wrong because so much has," says Thapa, a diplomat's daughter who spent many of her younger years in the United States and speaks English with a US accent.

"Yet if we in Nepal have been unable to understand our present, so too has the rest of the world," says Thapa, who graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design before deciding that she wanted to write.

AID AGENCIES SAY

Tsunami relief effort in critical phase

AFP, Geneva

Six months after the tsunami that battered countries around the Indian Ocean, the unprecedented international relief effort spurred by the disaster is in a critical phase, aid agencies said Wednesday.

"We're now in the more tricky period of recovery," said David Nabarro, crisis chief at the World Health Organisation.

"The next three months are key. That's when we have to make sure everything maintains its momentum," he told reporters.

According to official figures, the global death toll from the tsunami was 180,355, although tens of thousands are still listed as missing.

Indonesia's Aceh province was the hardest-hit region, but December's disaster also struck Indian, Sri Lanka, Thailand and

other Indian Ocean nations including Maldives and Somalia.

The response to the tsunami was unprecedented, with 12 to 13 billion dollars (9.8 to 10.4 billion euros) in aid pledged to the United Nations, other aid agencies and governments — although not all donors have made good on their promises.

"There was speed, there was a bold response," said Simon Missiry, head of Asia Pacific department at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Local Red Cross aid workers were among the first on the scene, bringing relief within half an hour of the disaster — even though many had lost their families to the tsunami, he added.

Such action, plus the rapid international aid effort, helped ward off epidemics and starvation, which often strike hard in disaster zones, the agencies said.