

AFGHANISTAN SAYS al-Qaeda, Taliban leaders are in Pakistan

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan said Wednesday that senior Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders were hiding in Pakistan's tribal areas, the latest salvo in a row between the two neighbours over their success in the so-called "war on terror".

The comments by Interior Ministry spokesman Lutfullah Mashal came a day after Pakistan's interior minister was quoted as saying that Osama bin Laden and other key militants may be in southern Afghanistan.

"We believe that the senior Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders are still hiding in the tribal belt of Pakistan's federally controlled tribal area," Mashal told AFP.

US and Afghan officials have long said they think bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda kingpins have been hiding out in the mountains on the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan since the Taliban were toppled in late 2001.



PHOTO: AFP
Activists from India's Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP) are soaked by water cannon by police during a protest rally in New Delhi yesterday following an attack by militants on a disputed holy site in the northern town of Ayodhya on Tuesday.

Africa urges G8 to scrap debt, reform trade

REUTERS, Sirte, Libya

African leaders urged a summit of rich nations opening in Britain on Wednesday to cancel debt owed by African governments, reform international trade and increase aid to fight poverty on the continent.

Heads of state of the African Union (AU), ending a two-day meeting in Libya, also pledged to step up efforts to end war and political instability and improve standards of governance to attract investment to the world's poorest continent.

"We request the developed countries and development partners to expedite the process of total debt cancellation for Africa by the year 2007," said a resolution issued on the eve of the summit of the Group of Eight countries in Scotland.

"We call on the international community to establish a fair and equitable trading system and to facilitate Africa's access to fair markets through... the elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers... and trade distorting subsidies and domestic support, especially in agriculture."

Protesters, police clash as G8 leaders arrive

AFP, Gleneagles

Black-clad protesters fought pitched battles with police as the world's most powerful leaders convened on a massively-secured luxury Scottish golf resort to help Africa's poor and curb global warming.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair flew in by helicopter to the French chateau-style Gleneagles complex where he will host the Group of Eight summit, protected by a five-mile (eight-kilometer) no-fly zone, a tethered blimp with infra-red cameras, makeshift look-out posts and 10,000 police.

An hour's drive away in Stirling, activists, some armed with iron bars, smashed cars and hurled bricks through the windows of a Burger King fast-food restaurant. Later, about 200 protesters in hooded tops, scarves obscuring their faces, barricaded roads and hurled missiles at police.

Near the summit site itself in the town of Auchterarder, a rally that

was planned for later in the day was cancelled. Protesters had been planning to mock the G8, dressing up as kilts and wearing masks imitating the leaders of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States.

Blair, who landed in Edinburgh a few hours earlier after a frantic bout of campaigning for London's bid to host the Olympics in 2012, hopes to bridge personal rifts and deep differences to reach a momentous deal to help Africa, perhaps even an agreement to slow global warming.

The three-day gathering, which starts with a dinner hosted by Queen Elizabeth II, is already beset by squabbles over everything from the world climate to the Olympics contest and the quality of British food.

"We set difficult targets and we knew they were difficult targets, but we decided to just go for it and see how far we could get," Blair's

spokesman said Tuesday evening in Singapore, where the Olympic decision will be made.

A commitment by G8 nations to double annual aid to Africa to 50 billion dollars was "close" to being agreed, he said. The major powers have already struck a deal to eliminate 40 billion dollars of debt owed by 18 poor countries, including 14 from Africa, to international institutions.

On climate change, US President George W. Bush appeared determined to give no ground other than conceding that humans do have a role in contributing to a warming of the planet.

"I recognize that the surface of the Earth is warmer and that an increase in greenhouse gases caused by humans is contributing to the problem," Bush told a press conference in Copenhagen before flying to Scotland.

Bush defends Iraq decisions

AP, Copenhagen

President Bush, shadowed in Europe by a pressing concern from home, said Wednesday he will not select a Supreme Court nominee based on a "litmus test" on sensitive issues like abortion. He urged senators to act in "a dignified way" in the battle over confirming his candidate.

Visiting this Scandinavian nation to thank Danes for sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush also strongly defended his decisions on Iraq, climate change, imprisoning terrorism suspects and aid to Africa all things that have made him unpopular in Europe.

"I understand that people aren't going to agree with decisions I make," Bush said as he stood alongside Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen with the Danish leader's official summer residence in the background. "I truly believe we're laying the foundation for peace."

Bush spent his 59th birthday here to thank Denmark for the several hundred troops the Scandinavian nation has contributed to the US-led fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Speaking of the mission in Iraq, Bush said, "I know many miss their loved ones and I know how hard it is for families in times of deployment." He spoke at the prime minister's side, the white mansion on the outskirts of Copenhagen filling the background behind them.

Fogh Rasmussen said the Danes were glad to help with both missions.

"We share the belief that freedom is universal and we share the belief that in the struggle between democracy and dictatorship you cannot stay neutral," the prime minister said.

Bush said he is proud of his administration's tripling of US aid to Africa, and his decision to double aid again by 2010.

Austria probes accusations over Iran's Ahmadinejad

AFP, Vienna

Austrian officials said Wednesday they were checking an accusation by an exiled Iranian journalist living in France that Iranian president-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was involved in the 1989 murder of an Iranian Kurdish leader in Vienna.

The ministers of justice and the interior said there were "checking" the allegation, which was made public by environmentalist deputy Peter Pilz.

Pilz charged on Saturday that Austria had documents proving that Ahmadinejad was directly involved in preparations for the murder of Kurdish chief Abdel Aahmane Ghassemlou.

Pak envoy in Iraq packs his bags

AFP, Baghdad

Pakistan's ambassador in Iraq was packing his bags to leave Baghdad Wednesday after narrowly escaping an assassination attempt in a new insurgent tactic of targeting Muslim envoys.

In fresh violence, a policeman was killed and 10 others wounded in an attack on their patrol in eastern Baghdad and a senior police officer was wounded in a drive by shooting in the capital, hospital and interior ministry sources said.

A roadside bomb explosion in a tunnel in the capital's busy Bab al-Shurji commercial district caused no casualties and little damage, police said.

US marines said they and Iraqi forces will "remain indefinitely" inside the town of Hit in the restive Al-Anbar province after launching

an anti-insurgency operation in the area one week ago.

"The force will continue to conduct joint patrolling and stabilisation operations to quell insurgent intimidation," said a military statement.

US troops continue to battle insurgents in lawless Anbar six months after the massive assault on the area's former rebel bastion of Fallujah.

Ambassador Yunis Khan meanwhile was packing his bags after Islamabad decided to relocate him to Amman following an attempt on his life Tuesday.

"He is about to leave," an embassy official told AFP. "It is just a temporary measure."

Bahrain's top envoy to Iraq Hassan al-Ansari was also shot and wounded in an attempted kidnapping Tuesday.

The attacks, which the Iraqi government said were aimed at undermining its sovereignty and progress, come after the shock abduction of Egypt's ambassador-designate on Saturday.

The group of Al-Qaeda's frontman in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, claimed the kidnapping of Ihab al-Sharif, according to statement received by Arab television station Al-Arabiya late Tuesday.

Dalai Lama marks 70th birthday

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Hundreds of Tibetan exiles have gathered in the northern Indian town of Dharamsala to celebrate the 70th birthday of the Dalai Lama. The spiritual leader is expected to address the crowds later in the day.

A three-day Tibetan dance and music festival has been organised in honour of the event. The Dalai Lama has lived in India since he fled Tibet in 1959, basing his government-in-exile in the hilltop town of Dharamsala.

He began Wednesday's festivities by unveiling a book on India's independence hero Mahatma Gandhi.

The Dalai Lama's personal secretary, Tensing Takala, told the BBC that various celebrations were planned. "The birthday celebrations began early today and are continuing with great enthusiasm, despite the heavy monsoon rain here. Large numbers of Tibetans have been standing outside his holiness' home since morning," he said.

The Dalai Lama also spoke to the journalists outside his home. Responding to a query whether the Tibetan dispute with China would be resolved in his lifetime, the Dalai Lama smiled and said: "I hope so. We need patience and determination".

But China is unlikely to give him the birthday gift he most wants - movement on negotiations over the future of Tibet.



PHOTO: AFP
Tibetan spiritual leader in-exile, His Holiness The Dalai Lama (C) attends his 70th birthday celebrations in Dharamsala yesterday. Tibetan exiles celebrated the 14th Dalai Lama's 70th birthday in Dharamsala, a northern Indian hilltop town, home to the god-king since 1959 when he fled his country with thousands of kinsmen.

Indian flag not allowed below the belt!

AFP, New Delhi

India is to allow national sports teams and fashion designers to display the country's tricolour on clothes -- but not below the belt.

The cabinet has approved an amendment to the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act. This removes sweeping restrictions on the display of the national flag provided clothes do not show "disrespect", local media reported Wednesday.

The tricolour -- of orange, white and green with a wheel of time in the centre -- can now be worn by national sports players, on national costume and on military uniforms according to the amendment to be

introduced into parliament, the Hindustan Times reported.

However the flag cannot appear on lingerie or other accessories worn below the waist, the newspaper said. Embroidering or printing it on cushions, gloves, handkerchiefs or napkins remains forbidden.

The decision to amend the law was sparked by a home ministry decree in February that banned cricketers and other sports stars from displaying the flag anywhere on their kit.

This included star batsman Sachin Tendulkar's helmet or captain Sourav Ganguly's trademark batting gloves painted in the colours of the Indian flag.

Settlers plan mass march in Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli settlers unveiled plans Wednesday for a mass march on Gaza to protest the pullout from the territory as Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas eyed a new summit with Ariel Sharon before the withdrawal.

The march, which has been arranged for July 18, will take place exactly four weeks before the scheduled start of the operation to remove all 8,000 of the settlers from Gaza as well as several hundred residents of four small Jewish enclaves in the northern West Bank.

"This massive show of strength towards Gush Katif should help our heroic brothers," a statement from

the Yesha settlers council said in reference to the main settlement bloc in the south of the occupied territory.

"The goal is to reach the settlements... and to populate them with hundreds of additional families."

"Even if the army and police try to prevent the demonstrators from advancing, they will steadfastly move ahead on foot until they join up with our besieged brothers in Gush Katif."

The statement said that convoys would leave from all major towns and cities in Israel and gather in the southern desert town of Netivot and then begin the 15 kilometre march towards the border into Gaza.



PHOTO: AFP
A Palestinian woman weeps next to Israeli soldiers at the steps of her neighbours' home after the destruction of her house by army bulldozers in the northern West Bank hamlet of Khibet, east of the city of Nablus yesterday. The Israeli army razed 17 sheds and makeshift homes, which housed peasant farmers and shepherds, in the area, according to witnesses and security sources. Residents said they had recently received notice that the buildings, which are situated close to the Jewish settlement of Mekhora, were to be destroyed as they had been constructed "within a military zone."