

# 17 Spanish troops die in Afghan chopper crash

AP, Kabul

Two helicopters carrying Nato-led forces to prepare for next month's elections crashed yesterday in the desert in western Afghanistan, killing at least 17 Spanish troops, officials said.

Afghan army commander Abdul Wahab Walizada, whose troops are providing security in the area near Herat, said the aircraft came too close to each other while flying and their rotor blades collided.

But Maj. Andrew Elmes, a spokesman for Nato's International Security Assistance Force in Kabul, said it was too early to know the cause, but it was believed to have been an accident and not due to rebel activity. He said earlier that mechanical failure may have been

to blame.

One of the helicopters belonging to the international security force crashed in the desert near Herat, killing 17 Spanish troops the first troops from Spain to be killed in Afghanistan, officials said.

The second helicopter made an emergency landing in the same area and an unspecified number of troops on board were believed to be injured, Elmes said, adding that rescuers had reached the site to recover the dead and wounded.

The crash came less than two months after suspected insurgents shot down a US military Chinook helicopter in eastern Kunar province a hotbed for Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents near the border with Pakistan. All 16 US forces on board were killed.

In Madrid, a Spanish Defence Ministry official, who asked not to be named in compliance with his department's policy, said 12 soldiers and five crew died in Tuesday's crash, but the cause was unknown.

Elmes declined to comment on the nationality of the troops or how many casualties there were, but Herat province is largely free of violence by Taliban-led rebels.

"We do not think the helicopter crashed because of enemy activity. We think it was an accident," he said. "The second helicopter landed heavily. There are survivors from that helicopter."

He said both choppers were on a training mission to support crucial Sept. 18 legislative elections the next major step toward democracy for Afghanistan after more than two

decades of war and civil strife.

Spain has about 800 troops in Afghanistan assisting the Nato-led security force.

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero broke off his vacation in the Canary Islands to return to Madrid and meet with defence ministry officials, his office said.

The crash was the second major deadly incident involving Spanish troops deployed in Afghanistan. In May 2003, 62 Spanish peacekeepers returning home from Afghanistan died when their Russian-built YAK-42 plane crashed near Trabzon in northwest Turkey. Thirteen Ukrainian and Belarusian crew members of the aircraft also died.

## Lanka to extend emergency

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president called yesterday for a month's extension of a state of emergency to give police and troops greater powers to hunt down the assassins of the country's foreign minister.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga summoned an emergency session of parliament for Thursday to extend the emergency powers, invoked Saturday for an initial 10 days, which allow searches without a warrant and detention without charges.

Kumaratunga has blamed Tamil Tiger rebels for Friday's sniper attack on Lakshman Kadirgamar,

which sparked fears that a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire in place since February 2002 could break down.

A soldier was killed by a suspected Tamil rebel sniper in the northeast on Tuesday, the military said, adding that a separate search was under way in the area for the attacker.

Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen and his deputy Vidar Helgesen met the president and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse to discuss the peace process after attending Kadirgamar's state funeral Monday.

A spokesman for Rajapakse said the government stressed the need for the international community to pressure

the Tigers to abide by the truce.

"The prime minister talked about the need for greater international pressure on the Tigers," the spokesman said without giving details.

Police and troops conducted searches throughout the capital Tuesday for the assassins and other suspected Tamil rebels.

"Our information is that a lot of Tigers have infiltrated the city in recent years," defence ministry spokesman Daya Ratnayake said. "A lot of searches are going on now. We are assisting the police and the idea is to get at the infiltrators and their weapons."

A spokesman for Rajapakse said the government stressed the need for the international community to pressure

## Australia seeks 20,000 skilled immigrants

AFP, Sydney

Australia is seeking 20,000 skilled immigrants to fill job vacancies in its biggest global recruitment drive since the 1950s, officials said yesterday.

The government will target workers with skills in areas including engineering, trades, the health sector and accounting, Immigration Department spokesman Abdul Rizvi told national radio.

The department is organising a series of expose advertising Australia's culture and lifestyle in London, Berlin, Amsterdam and Chennai in India but "we are looking for skills from anywhere," Rizvi said.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli settlers scuffle with Israeli police officers after they and other protesters attempted to block the main road to the southern Gaza Strip Gush Katif settlement of Neve Dekalim yesterday. More than 50,000 soldiers and policemen are taking part in the eviction operation of 8,000 settlers from Gaza Strip which started Monday.

# Clashes erupt in Gaza

AFP, Neve Dekalim

Israeli settlers wept tears of rage and defiance yesterday as they clashed with security forces poised to evict them from their Gaza Strip homes after a midnight deadline.

Police and soldiers traded punches with their fellow Israeli citizens in the main settlement of Neve Dekalim, underlining the rifts within the Jewish state that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon promised would heal after Israel ends its 38-year presence in the occupied territory.

While the arrival of dozens of removal vans inside Neve Dekalim

showed that some were willing to give up their fight after police stormed in, hardliners were literally digging themselves elsewhere in the coastal strip of land.

The settlers' sense of pain and bewilderment at their one-time champion Sharon was summed up in the front-page headline of their Hatfoze newspaper: "Gush Katif Weeps".

The reality of their situation was underlined when police used bulldozers and hawksaws to force their way into Neve Dekalim, the largest of the doomed 21 communities which is situated in the main Gush Katif bloc.

A police spokesman said a decision had been made to forcibly enter to enable vans to remove the belongings of residents who wanted to leave voluntarily.

"We came in at around 7 am (0400 GMT) in order to allow 120 trucks to get inside for those who want to voluntarily evacuate. We are not going to allow anyone to stop them," Superintendent Eli Levi told AFP.

As the convoy of vans drove through Neve Dekalim, they found their way blocked by a group of some 150 youths who tried to form a human chain across the road outside the municipal headquarters.

## Israel hopes pullout will end bashing at UN

AP, United Nations

Israel hopes its disengagement from Gaza and parts of the West Bank will end "Israel bashing" at the United Nations and lead to peace with the Palestinians, Israel's UN ambassador said.

For most of its history, Israel has found itself nearly alone at the United Nations, supported only by the United States and a few other countries while facing dozens of Arab and Muslim states that have pushed anti-Israel resolutions in the General Assembly and the Security Council.

On the day that Israel started its pullout from Gaza, UN envoy Dan Gillerman told a news conference Monday that "it is time for the United Nations to acknowledge Israel's actions" and to show that it not only supports the pullout "but is doing something to demonstrate that support."



PHOTO: AFP

Local residents gaze at a collapsed house at Kazo, in Saitama prefecture yesterday after a powerful earthquake hit northern Japan. Japan was rocked by the 7.2 quake earlier in the day off its Pacific Ocean coast that injured at least 59 people, setting off small tsunami waves and swaying towering buildings in the heart of Tokyo.

## US scrambles to keep Iraq on track

AFP, Washington

US officials scrambled to keep Iraq's political process on track, hailing "substantial progress" in drafting a new constitution despite a deadlock that forced negotiators to miss Monday's deadline.

President George W. Bush applauded the Iraqis' "heroic efforts" to finalise a charter and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed confidence a week's extension of the deadline would not disrupt the political calendar.

The US administration badly needed to maintain the political momentum in Iraq to counter a raging insurgency that has sent the US death toll climbing and support for the war here plummeting.

Bush said last week that a constitution "can be and should be agreed

upon by August 15th," while Rice had made a mantra of stressing the Iraqis had never come up against a deadline they didn't meet.

With Shia, Kurdish and Sunni negotiators still stalemated over issues ranging from federalism to the role of Islam and forced to seek an additional seven days Monday, US officials remained relentlessly upbeat.

"I applaud the heroic efforts of Iraqi negotiators and appreciate their work to resolve remaining issues through continued negotiation and dialogue," Bush said in a statement released at his Texas ranch.

"Iraqi leaders have announced that they have made substantial progress toward a draft constitution," Bush said. "Their efforts are a tribute to democracy and an example that difficult problems can be solved peacefully."

## Guatemalan prison riots kill 31

AP, Guatemala City

Near-simultaneous attacks and riots at seven Guatemalan prisons that left 31 inmates dead show the organisational power of Central America's gangs, whose members communicate between prisons through cell phones and visitors, officials said.

The violence began with two grenade explosions at a makeshift prison for gang members and apparently coordinated attacks by Mara Salvatrucha gang members against the rival MS-18 gang at other prisons, Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann and Escuintla Gov. Luis Munoz said.

Rival gang members fought bloody clashes with guns and knives before the violence was brought under control.

## 30 Taliban killed

AFP, Kandahar

Some 30 suspected Taliban militants have been killed and 28 were captured in renewed violence in southern Afghanistan, officials and the defence ministry said Monday.

Afghanistan is set to hold its first parliamentary elections in over 30 years on September 18 but there are fears that the countdown to polls will be marred by continued guerrilla attacks.

Most of the casualties occurred over the weekend in the neighbouring southern provinces of Zabul and Uruzgan, the defence ministry said in a statement released on Monday.

"During an operation by the Afghan National Army on Sunday - 16 Taliban fighters were killed and one was captured in Zabul province," the statement said.

In separate fighting, five suspected Taliban were killed in Deh Rawood in Uruzgan by Afghan military forces, it said.

Jan Mohammad Khan, the provincial governor for Uruzgan had earlier told AFP that seven Taliban insurgents were killed as they fled after attacking a security post.

It was not known if the incidents were related to each other.

According to Khan, 15 suspected rebels were captured during the fighting.

The defence ministry statement also said that up to six militants were captured including one of them a "known Taliban commander" who was seized in the Zabul's fighting on Sunday.

Five other arrests were made in southeastern Ghazni province when Afghan forces attacked a militants' hide out, according to the statement.

Meanwhile the US military on Sunday said that it had arrested a key Taliban commander, named as Qari Baba, and killed four militants over the weekend.

## Military, rebels greet Aceh pact with caution

REUTERS, Banda Aceh

Indonesia's military and Acehnese rebels on Tuesday cautiously welcomed a peace pact but each expressed doubts the other would stick to the deal.

The pact, signed in the Finnish capital Helsinki on Monday, stipulates the rebels should surrender all arms, ammunition and explosives in four stages before December 31 in tsunami-ravaged Aceh province on the northern tip of Sumatra island.

In return, the Indonesian military must halve its current force to 14,700 troops, using a timeframe matching the decommissioning of Free Aceh Movement (GAM) rebels.

"We will move all of our striking teams to residential areas. They will no longer conduct offensive operations to seek and destroy GAM," Indonesia military chief General Endriartono Sutarto told reporters after meeting soldiers at a base near the provincial capital of Banda Aceh.

## Police post bombed near Kathmandu

AFP, Kathmandu

Suspected Maoist rebels shot and wounded a policeman and bombed a police post in separate incidents yesterday on the outskirts of Nepal's capital Kathmandu, police said.

A head constable was in serious condition after being shot by gunmen at Gokarna on the eastern edge of Kathmandu, a police official said.

A police post in Lalitpur district just south of the capital was bombed in a pre-dawn attack.

"A group of suspected armed Maoists stormed the police post at around 4.00 am Tuesday and destroyed the building by bombing it," the official said.

In another incident, a group of suspected rebels entered a university campus examination hall at Lahan in southwestern Siraha district and attacked two police guards protecting the students, the official said.

## MUSLIM GROUPS TO BLAIR

# Don't demonise Islam

## Fresh attack fear haunts London

AFP, London

Thirty-eight Muslim groups issued a joint protest yesterday against anti-terrorist measures set out by Prime Minister Tony Blair in the wake of the London bombings, saying they risked demonising Islam.

The groups, including the Islamic Human Rights Commission and the Muslim Association of Britain, also condemned plans to ban the Islamist political organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain.

"We fear that recent events are being exploited by some sections in society to demonise legitimate Islamic values and beliefs and hence consider it appropriate to make the following observations," they said.

"If it is suggested that any laws

have been broken by any individuals or groups then this must be proven by due legal process," they said.

"Criminalising the mere possession of certain opinions is the hallmark of dictatorships, not democracies."

Blair, saying "the rules of the game are changing," announced a raft of measures earlier this month in a bid to rein in Islamic extremists in the wake of the London bombings last month.

They included the deportation of foreign Islamic radicals, and a ban on groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, which was among the 38 groups to sign Tuesday's statement.

Banning Hizb ut-Tahrir is "unwarranted, unjust and unwise," the statement said, adding that any

disagreement with a political organisation should be dealt with through debate, not censorship.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is banned in some other European and Middle Eastern countries, opposes violence, but some observers claim it is a gateway for young people towards more violent expressions of Islam.

In issuing Tuesday's statement, Massoud Shadjareh, chairman of the Islamic Human Rights Commission, said: "The British Muslim community has always been a law-abiding community and all its endeavours to create a just society have been entirely peaceful."

"However, we will not allow the demonising, devaluing or targeting of Islamic values, which will we hold very dear."

Meanwhile, Britain remains "worried" by the prospect of a repeat of last month's deadly bombings in London despite the swift pace of a continuing police investigation, Home Secretary Charles Clarke said Monday.

"We remain worried... It would be ridiculous for us to assume that a further act could not take place," Clarke told reporters after a briefing at Scotland Yard with Sir Ian Blair, head of London's Metropolitan Police.

Fifty-six people were killed, including four apparent suicide bombers, in the July 7 attack on three Underground railway trains and a double-decker bus in the British capital.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents cross a flooded street in Chiang Mai town in Thailand's northern province. At least six people have died and nine others remain missing after the worst flash floods in years hit northern Thailand including the historic city of Chiang Mai.

## US to deport Pak imam seized in terrorism probe

REUTERS, San Francisco

A Muslim cleric in California believed by US officials to be a contact man for a Pakistani-American who trained at an al-Qaeda camp agreed on Monday to be deported.

Shabbir Ahmed, 39, a former imam for a mosque in Lodi, California, will be sent to his native Pakistan as part of an agreement with the US government, which had charged him with overstaying his visa.

Ronald Le Fevre, chief counsel for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement in San Francisco, said Ahmed's agreement to be deported would remove "a threat from our midst."

"Once he leaves the United States, Ahmed will no longer be in a position to advance any doctrine of hate from within our community," Le Fevre said.