

Afghan minister narrowly escapes death

Army chief survives chopper crash, 30 Taliban killed in attack

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's defence minister narrowly escaped an apparent assassination attempt yesterday while another minister and the army chief survived a helicopter crash in a dramatic day of near-misses, officials said.

At least 30 suspected Taliban militants have been killed during an ongoing operation by Afghan and US-led forces in southern Afghanistan a week before parliamentary elections, the defence ministry said.

Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak had just left Kabul airport at 9:25 am (0455 GMT) in a helicopter when his car was fired on by four men in combat uniform, ministry spokesman General Mohammed Zahir Azimi told AFP.

"The four who opened fire on the defence minister's vehicle have been arrested," Azimi said.

Hours later, a helicopter crashed at Wardak's destination in the Panjshir Valley north of Kabul,

where senior officials were attending a ceremony commemorating the assassination of anti-Taliban leader Ahmed Shah Massoud four years ago.

Army chief Bismillah Khan and Sediqa Balkhi, minister for the disabled, were slightly injured in the crash, according to presidential spokesman Karim Rahimi.

Defence ministry spokesman Azimi said Wardak was not on board. He denied reports that the aircraft had been fired on and said it crashed when its rotor blades hit a tree, shortly before noon.

"While an Afghan helicopter was landing in Panjshir, its rotor blade touched a tree and the helicopter fell to one side. Since it was very close to the ground no one was wounded or killed," Azimi said.

"It was definitely an accident," he added.

However, presidential spokesman Rahimi said the helicopter was taking off when it crashed.

"The chopper crashed while taking off. Bismillah Khan and the

minister for the disabled were on board. According to initial reports one of the pilots and the ministers have been slightly injured," he said.

At least 30 suspected Taliban militants have been killed during an ongoing operation by Afghan and US-led forces in southern Afghanistan a week before parliamentary elections, the defence ministry said Saturday.

"During an operation in Grishk district of Helmand on Friday, Afghan and coalition forces killed 30 enemies and captured... 60 others," defence ministry spokesman Mohammad Zahir Azimi told reporters in Kabul.

Azimi said a large number of weapons and ammunition were also seized from the captured fighters during the operation in the south-west province of Helmand.

Azimi said the operation involving Afghan and US-led forces was ongoing in the restive province where militants from the ousted Taliban regime regularly attack foreign and Afghan troops.

Two suspected suicide bombers were killed Wednesday as their explosives-packed car blew up in Grishk.

War-torn Afghanistan will next week hold its first parliamentary elections since the Taliban regime were toppled by a US-led coalition in late 2001.

Earlier a parliamentary candidate narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in which one of his bodyguards and an attacker were also killed in western Afghanistan, an official said Saturday.

Ghulam Nabi Balouch, standing in the war-torn country's September 18 parliament elections escaped unharmed when unknown gunmen opened fire on his campaigning vehicle just outside Herat city on Friday, the official said.

"Mr. Balouch survived, but one of his bodyguards was killed in the firing," Noor Ahmad Alizai, district chief of Kohsan district where the attack occurred told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

A worker of SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) rescues a dog in the flooded streets of New Orleans Friday. Rescuers clap their hands to catch the attention of the dogs until they start barking. Hundreds of animals were abandoned during the evacuation of the city after Hurricane Katrina devastation.

Host states count Katrina costs

REUTERS, New York

State and local officials across the United States are busy saving receipts for billions of dollars in expenses for aid to Hurricane Katrina victims, expecting the federal government will pick up the whole tab.

It may be weeks before they have a firm handle on the amount of the costs, but state officials said on Friday they were spending to help evacuees first and would sort out their costs later with the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"Fema has promised us 100 percent reimbursement on our expenses," said Jim Harris, a spokesman for Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee. "The governor said he didn't want to hear about one human need that did not get met because of the paperwork."

Arkansas had at least 60,000 evacuees early this week, including people who left neighbouring Louisiana on their own before the storm hit. But that number is rapidly shifting as people start to make alternative arrangements to leave shelters, he said.

Harris said it was impossible to gauge how much is being spent at

the state and local level, but added that many church groups had stepped in to offer help, including camp facilities.

Huckabee initially has set aside \$10 million from the state's emergency fund to aid the disaster relief operations.

Texas has more than 202,000 evacuees, including about 97,000 in shelters and another 105,000 in hotels, private homes and other locations, according to the state's Emergency Management Division.

"We've asked for all Texas officials to keep an accurate accounting of costs that are directly related to the relief effort so that we can ensure these are reimbursed," said Steve McCraw, director of the state's Office of Homeland Security.

It is not yet clear whether all expenses will be covered, but McCraw said he wants documentation for everything just in case -- from police overtime to hotel bills to school expenses for evacuees.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry has appealed to the federal government to cover millions of dollars in Medicaid funds that the state will pay to care for evacuees.



PHOTO: AFP

US soldiers stand in attention in front of a wall of flags at Bagram Air Base, some 40kms east of Kabul, yesterday as they take part in a ceremony remembering the victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington.

Hundreds evacuated as rains lash Mumbai

AFP, Mumbai

Hundreds of people were evacuated from low-lying areas of India's commercial capital Mumbai yesterday after a spell of heavy rains caused light flooding in some districts, officials said.

Office workers stayed home following the downpour late Friday evening and early Saturday that triggered memories of the floods just over a month ago that killed more than 400 people.

Nearly 300 families living in slums in low-lying areas were moved to higher ground. "This was done as a precautionary measure," Mumbai municipal commissioner Johny Joseph said.

"All emergency services are on alert and we're in constant touch with the weather bureau," Krishna Vatsa, head of Mumbai's disaster management cell, told AFP.

The regional meteorological department forecast "frequent spells of rain or thundershowers with one or two heavy spells" for Mumbai until early Sunday.

'War on terror diverted US resources from disaster prevention'

AFP, Washington

Four years after the September 11 attacks, the failure of the US emergency services to handle the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina is due to resources being diverted to the "war on terror," experts say. With thousands of National Guard soldiers deployed in Iraq and medical resources being diverted to deal with a potential biological attack, the southern United States was less prepared than it might have been when Katrina struck on August 29.

"The most recent effects of these diversions of funding have been seen in the unfolding tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the surrounding area," said Erica Frank from Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta.

"Had there been more bodies on the ground, there would have been fewer deaths. But 7,000 National Guards from Louisiana and Mississippi are deployed

in Iraq," she said.

In June 2004, southern Louisiana's emergency management chief Walter Maestri told the local Time Picayune newspaper that federal funds appeared to have been diverted instead of paying for repairs the state's dykes, designed to protect the low-lying region from flooding.

"Nobody locally is happy that the levees can't be finished, and we are doing everything we can to make the case that this is a security issue for us," he wrote at the time.

"It appears that the money has been moved in the president's budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq, and I suppose that's the price we pay."

Had the thousands of the National Guard deployed in Iraq instead been at home, Frank said, they would have been on hand to help prevent the disaster, to have rescued those trapped, contained the human losses and helped survivors.

Military bars journalists from body-filled areas

AFP, Baton Rouge

The military will bar journalists and photographers from documenting the recovery of bodies left littering New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, the army general in charge said Friday.

Lieutenant General Russel Honore, the commander of the relief operation on the US Gulf Coast, said that while the military had allowed reporters covering the catastrophe free rein, it was now slamming the door shut out of respect for the possibly thousands of victims and their families.

"We've had total access to everything we've done -- the good, the bad and the ugly -- but that operation (the recovery of corpses) will be conducted with dignity and respect for the families," Honore said.

"There will be zero access to that operation. It would not be good to have pictures of people, the deceased shown on any media," Honore said calling for published

pictures of corpses to be removed from websites.

"You should hold yourselves accountable for when someone sees and will be able to recognise the home or location that their loved passed in," he told a press conference in the Louisiana capital of Baton Rouge.

Honore said journalists would be restricted from entering parts of the city that have been submerged as the water is slowly drained by pumps, revealing a grisly harvest of corpses in the richest and most powerful country on earth.

But he indicated that reporters crammed into a handful of hotels in the city centre would not be kicked out of the city.

"Not in the area you are in now," he said when asked if reporters movements would be restricted in New Orleans. Some newsmen have reported difficulties in gaining access to the city through military checkpoints.

Bush opens 3-day 9/11 commemorations

AFP, REUTERS, Washington/Bagram

US President George W. Bush said Friday that the United States must defeat Islamist extremists in a global "battle of ideas," as he marked four years since the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The war on terrorism "will not be won by force of arms alone. We must defeat the terrorists on the battlefield and we also must defeat them in the battle of ideas," he said in a speech at the State Department.

The president spoke as one of his longest-serving and most trusted aides, communications wiz Karen Hughes, formally took over as the diplomat in charge of fixing the United States' global image amid international criticism over the war in Iraq and Washington's response to Hurricane Katrina.

US forces in Afghanistan held a solemn ceremony on Saturday to mark the fourth anniversary of the

September 11 attacks, remembering those who died then and in the US-led war on terrorism that followed.

Several hundred servicemen and women gathered in a huge hanger-like tent at Bagram air base, on a sun-baked plain north of Kabul, for a service that began with a brief video of the hijacked aircraft attacks four years ago.

"I'm here, my fellow soldiers are here, because of those attacks. They are with us always," said Sergeant Rick Scavetta, from Hartford, Connecticut.

The attacks killed nearly 3,000 people.

US-led forces overthrew Afghanistan's hardline Taliban regime in late 2001, after it refused to give up al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, architect of the attacks on the United States.

With much of the world aghast at US impotence in the face of the disaster, Bush emphasised the outpouring of sympathy and offers

of aid from around the globe and compared it to the expressions of solidarity after the 2001 strikes.

"In this time of struggle, the American people need to know we're not struggling alone," he said. "I want to thank the world community for its prayers and for the offers of assistance."

Bush said that more than 100 countries had offered help, citing Afghanistan, Canada, Israel, Italy, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates as well as the 25,000-dollar pledge from impoverished Sri Lanka.

Later, Bush was to pay tribute to police, firefighters and military personnel killed in the September 11 attacks in a White House ceremony to award the "9/11 Heroes Medal of Valor" to surviving relatives.

On Saturday, Bush was to link September 11 and Katrina again in his weekly radio address, according to White House spokesman Scott McClellan.

Koizumi leads the way on eve of polls

AFP, Tokyo

Japan was to end campaigning yesterday for one of its most closely watched elections in years, with Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi widely predicted to win a new mandate to push forward his economic reforms.

Poll after poll has indicated a Koizumi victory, with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) holding a commanding lead in Sunday's vote.

The influential Asahi Shimbun newspaper said a survey of 1,031 voters taken late in the week found support for the LDP had risen three points to 30 percent in the proportional representation section of the poll.

Backing for the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) had only edged up from 18 to 19 percent, the daily said.

The stock market, in an apparent bet on political stability and a win by market-friendly Koizumi, rallied on Friday to a new four-year high.

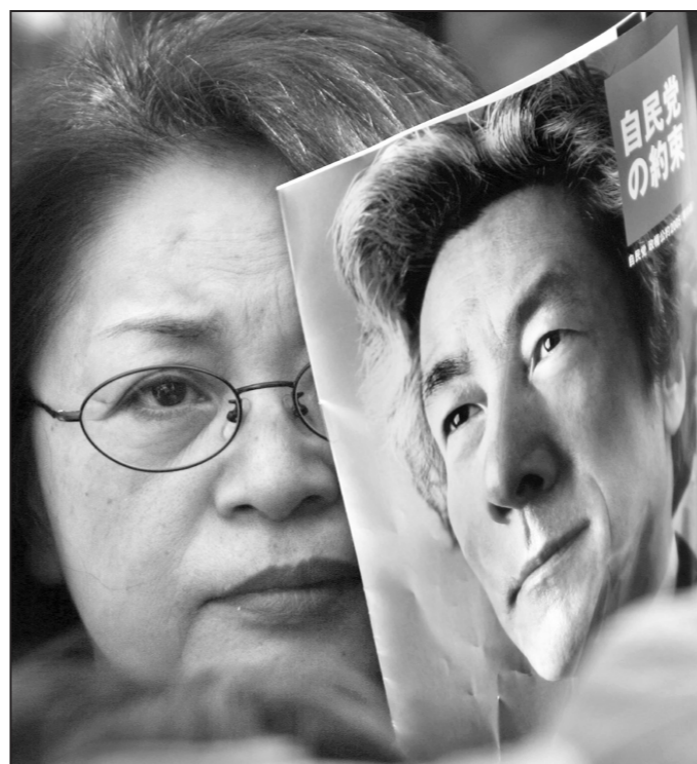


PHOTO: AFP

Holding a leaflet of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, a woman looks at Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi during his stumping tour in Tokyo yesterday, the last day of a campaign for today's lower house elections.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani people proceed to higher ground after their homes, which were built in the bed of a river in Karachi, were submerged by rising floodwaters. The southern coastal city received its first showers of the season just at the traditional end of the monsoon.

Plane crash kills 13 in DR Congo

AFP, Brazzaville

Thirteen people were killed when an Antonov 26 aircraft crashed during a storm near Brazzaville, on its descent to Kinshasa airport across the river in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), officials said.

It was the fourth accident involving a DRC-registered aircraft since the beginning of the month, prompting authorities in Kinshasa to crack down on safety violations and slap flight bans on nearly two-thirds of the country's private aviation companies.

"At the scene we have counted 13 dead and we haven't found any survivors," Congo's Director General for Health, Damaze Bozongo, told AFP.

In Kinshasa, DRC Transport Minister Eva Mwakasa said air traffic authorities lost contact with the aircraft late Friday as it was flying through a violent storm over the DRC's northern Equateur province.

The turboprop was flying from Boende in Equateur to Kinshasa, a distance of about 750km, according to the DRC aviation regulatory authority, RVA.

Kashmir rebels gun down 9 people

AFP, Srinagar

Suspected rebels in Indian Kashmir killed nine people, authorities said yesterday, amid mounting violence following high-level peace talks between New Delhi and moderate separatists.

Police said six people died late Friday when gunmen stormed into houses of three families and opened fire in a southern district of Kashmir where a revolt against Indian rule has raged since 1989.

"Gunmen, believed to be militants, barged into homes of three families in the village of Darmari and opened indiscriminate fire," a police spokesman said. Six people died on the spot while eight were wounded. The victims were all men.

In other violence, three soldiers were killed and four wounded Friday when militants opened fire on a convoy just south of the state summer capital Srinagar, army spokesman Vijay Batra told AFP.

The violence came days after moderate separatists held their first peace talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New

Delhi Monday.

Leading moderate separatist Mirwaiz Umar Farooq Friday launched a strong attack on separatist headline leaders who have criticised his dialogue with New Delhi, accusing them of being "happy to see the genocide go on in Kashmir just to maintain their leadership."

While not mentioning any of the hardliners by name, Farooq who is also Kashmir's chief Muslim cleric, accused the hardliners of "compulsive antagonism" toward efforts to resolve the insurgency peacefully.

Police said they suspected militants attacked the families 230km south of Srinagar as the men worked as special police officers fighting the insurgency.

Militants routinely target families of police and others helping Indian security forces.

Rebel group Lashkar-e-Toiba, based in the Pakistani zone of the divided Himalayan region, claimed responsibility for the attack on the army in a telephone call to a local news agency.

Rice asks China, Russia, India to support UN action against Iran

AP, AFP, Washington/ New Delhi

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is asking Russia, China and India to support the United States in threatening Iran with sanctions for refusing to halt its nuclear programme.

"Iran needs to get a message from the international community that is a unified message," Rice said at a news conference Friday. The message, she said, is that it is not acceptable for Iran to enter into negotiations with the Europeans on living up to its international obligations, and then to back out.

Iran refused to accept a US-backed European Union offer of economic concessions to halt suspicious nuclear activities, and Rice said a drive to round up support for UN Security Council consideration of Iran's behaviour was under way.

"We will be working with our colleagues on this," she said.

Approval is not assured in the Security Council even though French President Jacques Chirac has grown impatient with Iran. For one thing, China historically has opposed sanctions, Russia's stance is uncertain, and either one can kill a resolution with a veto. As she discussed her meetings coming up next week in New York during a session of the UN General Assembly, Rice said Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was granted a visa to attend even though he was ineligible because of terrorist ties. "I don't know if I will have a chance to bump into him," Rice said with a smile. "But you know, I am a pleasant person. I suppose I would say, 'Hello.'"

Referring to continuing US suspicions that Ahmadinejad played a role in Iranian radicals' takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979, Rice gave no indication she was willing to have serious talks with the Iranian leader.