

7 shot dead in pre-election Taliban attack

AFP, Kabul

Taliban militants shot dead seven Afghan civilians after finding a registration document for Sunday's milestone elections in their car, a provincial governor said Wednesday.

The attack on Tuesday in the central province of Uruzgan is the latest in a wave of violence ahead of the parliamentary and provincial council polls which has left more than 1,000 people dead this year.

Governor Jan Mohammad Khan told AFP that the rebels stopped a vehicle with seven people inside in Gizab district.

"They searched everybody and found an official document, a car registration for election day, on one of them. Then the Taliban killed the seven people," Khan said.

Separately on Tuesday Taliban guerrillas hanged an intelligence official in the southeastern province of Zabul, a known hotbed for the ousted hardline militia, police said.



PHOTO: AFP

An injured Iraqi man is being comforted by relatives outside a hospital following a suicide attack in the Shia pilgrimage district of Kadhimiyah in Baghdad yesterday. Five suicide bombings rocked Baghdad killing scores of people, US and Iraqi officials said. The deadliest attack occurred in Kadhimiyah, where day labourers gather in the early morning as they wait to be hired.

Hu vows to ease 'frictions' with US

AFP, New York

Chinese President Hu Jintao told US President George W. Bush that he would work to ease Sino-US "frictions," but withheld support on a US push for sanctions against Iran.

The two leaders, speaking before an hour-long meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, pledged to keep working together to end

North Korea's nuclear programs as six-nations talks on the matter resumed in Beijing.

Speaking through an interpreter during a joint public appearance, Hu offered to "step up" Chinese cooperation with the United States to "facilitate fresh progress" in the negotiations with the two Koreas, Japan, and Russia.

Looking at Sino-US relations, Hu said the "proper handling" of Taiwan -- which Beijing considers a renegade province and has vowed to reunite with the mainland -- was critical to future cooperation.

"I hope that the United States will join the Chinese side in safeguarding peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits and opposing so-called Taiwan independence," Hu said.

MANMOHAN TELLS BUSH Pakistan still controls flow of terror

PTI, New York

A day before he hosts a dinner for President Pervez Musharraf, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has done some plain-speaking on the violence in Jammu and Kashmir, telling US President George W. Bush that Pakistan still controls the flow of terror into the state.

"This (flow) must stop for any real progress to be made in the peace process," he told the US leader at a meeting, which lasted about 30 minutes, shortly after arriving on a four-day visit during which he will address the UN General Assembly and meet with other top world leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Hu Jintao.

Singh, who has maintained that he continued to trust Musharraf and that he was looking forward to meeting at dinner here, gave this assessment of the Indo-Pak peace process in response to Bush's

queries on the subject.

Another important topic at the meeting, held at Bush's request, was the "landmark" agreement reached between the two leaders in July under which the US Administration would seek Congressional approval to lift restrictions on supplies of equipment and fuel for India's civilian nuclear programme subject to India also fulfilling its commitments, including separating its civilian and military nuclear facilities.

Bush told the Prime Minister that he remained fully committed to the agreement and hoped that he would get the US Congressional approval for it. In response, Singh said he had Indian Parliament's backing for the agreement, although he was surprised that his predecessor Atal Bihari Vajpayee had been sharply critical of it.

Palestinians unite to celebrate pullout

AFP, Gaza Strip

Palestinians were to set aside their internal rivalries Wednesday at a mass rally amid the ruins of the largest of the former Gaza Strip settlements, to celebrate Israel's pullout from the territory.

Tens of thousands were expected to hear speeches from one of Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas's top lieutenants along with addresses from the leaders of militant groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad who have also claimed credit for the historic withdrawal.

The afternoon rally at Neve Dekalim comes after Abbas warned that his Palestinian Authority would no longer tolerate the armed chaos which has allowed militants to operate with impunity in the increasingly lawless and impoverished territory.

The largest of the armed factions, Hamas, responded by vowing to not only hold onto its weapons but to increase its attacks in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

In a televised address on Tuesday, the day after Israel ended

RESPONSE TO KATRINA

Bush takes blame for govt's failures

AFP, New Orleans

President George W. Bush accepted responsibility for the first time for failures in the government's response to Hurricane Katrina, as the confirmed death toll jumped above 650.

Speaking a day after getting his first close-up view of Katrina's catastrophic wake in New Orleans, Bush said the hurricane "exposed serious problems in our response capabilities at all levels of government."

"To the extent that the federal government didn't fully do its job right, I take responsibility," he told reporters in Washington.

"I want to know what went right and what went wrong," he added, a day after the head of the US federal disaster agency, Michael Brown, resigned amid a torrent of criticism

of the agency's handling of the disaster.

Facing his worst poll numbers ever and growing skepticism over his ability to manage a crisis, Bush was to make a speech Thursday outlining his plans for the stricken region, encompassing parts of Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi.

But as the floodwaters receded in storm-stricken New Orleans, a shattered landscape of ruined homes, wrecked cars and a thick foul-smelling sludge emerged, revealing the mounting human cost of the disaster.

The death toll in Louisiana leapt by more than 100 Tuesday, taking the total number of those confirmed dead across the Gulf Coast region to 657.

Louisiana Governor Kathleen

Blanco angrily accused the government of not moving fast enough to recover bodies.

"No one, it seems, even those at the highest level, seems to be able to break through the bureaucracy... I'm angry and outraged," Blanco said.

"In death as in life, our people have deserved better than they have received," she said.

The owners of one New Orleans nursing home, where the bodies of 34 people were found drowned in one of the more grisly discoveries after the disaster, were charged with negligent homicide, officials said.

The state was also investigating the deaths of 45 people at another hospital, Louisiana Attorney General Charles Fotti said.

US colonel says Laden ill: Report

REUTERS, Cairo

Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is in poor health and is seeking medical attention, the London-based Arabic newspaper al-Hayat said on Wednesday, quoting a US officer in Afghanistan.

"Osama bin Laden is trying to obtain medical attention," Colonel Don McGraw, director of operations at the Combined Forces Command in Kabul, told a group of British reporters, including one from al-Hayat, it said.

"He (McGraw) refused to say what the Qaeda leader is suffering from or whether it is the same kidney disease which Pakistani officials said in the past he was suffering from," the newspaper added.

Al-Hayat said it was not clear how the US military had obtained its information or where it thought bin Laden might be.

The Saudi-born militant is believed to have taken refuge somewhere on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan after escaping from US troops and their Afghan allies in 2001.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians run from an explosion in the security barrier that marks the border between Egypt and Gaza Strip, in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah yesterday. Hamas militants blew a gaping hole in the concrete barrier which had been hastily erected in a bid to stop Palestinians surging across the Gaza Strip border into Egypt, witnesses said.