

'Widening gap' between Afghanistan, Pakistan

Says Karzai after talks with Shaukat Aziz

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan and Pakistan remained at odds about the laying of mines on their shared border after top-level talks yesterday, with President Hamid Karzai noting a "widening gap" between the neighbours.

Karzai also told reporters after meeting with Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz he was "not satisfied" with Pakistan's efforts to organise an agreed tribal council to discuss the worsening Taliban insurgency.

Karzai called Aziz to Kabul for talks amid a new row between the Muslim neighbours about

Pakistan's plans to mine and fence part of the boundary to stem the crossborder movement of militants carrying out attacks in Afghanistan.

The countries are at loggerheads about the growing violence in Afghanistan, which accuses Pakistan of not doing enough against factions in its territory alleged to be training and funding the Islamist insurgents.

"The gap between Afghanistan and Pakistan unfortunately is widening," Karzai said at a media briefing after the talks, which ran overtime.

He repeated his strong objections to mining and fencing the rugged 2,500-kilometre (1,500-

mile) frontier, saying it was "very clear" this "cannot prevent terrorism but it will divide the two nations".

Afghanistan, one of the most mined countries in the world, also opposed the plan because of the "deadly human consequences" of mines, he said, echoing concerns raised by the United Nations.

Aziz said however Pakistan believed selective mining and fencing could stop the crossing of "people who are not welcome on the other side".

But Karzai said Afghanistan was "asking for other measures".

He added: "We have said, 'Let

us work against places where training for terrorism is taking place, where funding for terrorism is taking place, where supplies are given.'"

Aziz meanwhile announced the establishment of a commission to look at plans to call a tribal council, called a jirga, in the ethnic Pashtun areas along the border where Taliban militants are rooted.

Karzai mooted the idea at talks late last year with US President George W Bush and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, who agreed to the plan, which will see a similar meeting on the Afghan side of the border.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (L) and Afghan President Hamid Karzai listen to journalists questions during their joint press conference at the Presidential Palace in Kabul yesterday after formal talks.

'Nato killed too many Afghan civilians'

AP, Kabul

Nato said Wednesday that it killed too many Afghan civilians during fighting last year against resurgent Taliban militants, but that the Western alliance was working to change that in 2007.

The acknowledgment came one day after President Hamid Karzai's latest plea for foreign forces to use maximum caution following the deaths of two civilians, reportedly involving Nato troops.

"The single thing that we have done wrong and we are striving extremely hard to improve on (in 2007) is killing innocent civilians," Brig Richard E Nugee, the chief spokesman for Nato's International Security Assistance Force, told a news conference.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian students from St. Francis College hold a silent protest against Noida killings and atrocities against women and girls in Hyderabad yesterday. Public anger against the police has been growing since the remains of the 17 people, mainly children, who were kidnapped, raped and murdered, were found in the affluent Noida suburb in New Delhi last week.

Nepali Maoists to allow police posts to reopen

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepali police posts closed by Maoist threats during a decade-old revolt will be allowed to reopen to ensure timely polls for an assembly to map the nation's political future, the rebel chief said on Wednesday.

Nepal's multiparty government and the Maoists signed a landmark peace deal in November declaring an end to the conflict in which more than 13,000 people have died.

Under the deal, the Maoists are to join an interim government to oversee elections for a constituent assembly with the task of drawing up a new constitution for the Himalayan nation and deciding the future of its monarchy, which they want abolished.

This week, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala said the rebels were refusing to allow the government to reopen police posts, saying this could delay the elections planned by mid-June.

Maoist chief Prachanda responded on Wednesday. "We direct our party workers to provide necessary support to the government to immediately open the police posts in the Terai," he said in a statement, referring to the southern plains.

Mullah Omar hasn't seen Laden for yrs

REUTERS, Peshawar

Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar has added to the mystery over Osama bin Laden, saying he had not seen his ally and fellow fugitive since US-backed forces ousted the Taliban from Afghanistan in late 2001.

"No, I have neither seen him, nor have I made any effort to do so, but I pray for his health and safety," Omar said in an e-mailed response to questions sent by Reuters.

The questions were relayed to Omar through his spokesman Mohammad Hanif, and a reply was received late on Wednesday.

A half-dozen audio tapes of bin Laden were circulated during the first half of 2006, but the al-Qaeda leader last appeared on video tape in late 2004, while tapes of his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, have been issued regularly.

A video tape of bin Laden was released late last year, but it was identified as old footage, and the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States passed without any word from the al-Qaeda leader.

Kashmir leaders to visit Pakistan to push peace

REUTERS, New Delhi

Kashmir's main political separatists will visit Pakistan this month to try set up a permanent peace dialogue process to help end a 17-year revolt in the disputed Himalayan region, a top leader said on Thursday.

Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, chairman of the moderate faction of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, said his team would hold talks with Pakistani groups about President Pervez Musharraf's proposals for a phased plan to resolve the Kashmir dispute.

Hurriyat leaders could also hold talks with militant groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir during the visit, which is expected to last for about a week starting Jan. 15, he said.

The planned Hurriyat trip will begin two days after a visit to Islamabad by Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee who is expected to hold talks with Pakistani leaders to boost a fragile peace process between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

"This time we will focus not only on the government of Pakistan but we will also talk to the political parties of Pakistan about the proposed suggestions by Musharraf and discussing our own suggestions," Farooq told Reuters.

"How to institutionalise the (dialogue) process, how to try and find a common minimum programme between the parties on this side of Kashmir and parties on that side of Kashmir... that will be the focus," he said by phone from Srinagar, the main city of Indian Kashmir.

The visit to Pakistan will be the second for Farooq, who is also the chief cleric of Kashmir, since India

and Pakistan launched new moves in 2003 to make peace.

Some senior Hurriyat leaders who are likely to accompany him have also made a separate trip across the border. Hurriyat bands about two dozen political separatist groups.

Kashmir is at the heart of six decades of rivalry between India and Pakistan and the cause of two of their three wars.

A separatist revolt in Indian Kashmir has killed more than 40,000 people since 1989, according to officials. Human rights activists put the toll at around 60,000 dead or missing.

The India-Pakistan peace talks launched in early 2004 and negotiations separately between Kashmiri separatists and the governments of the two countries have made slow progress.

Last month, Musharraf said Pakistan would abandon its claim to the region if India agreed to give the territory autonomy under joint supervision by both countries.

New Delhi welcomed the proposal saying it could be discussed during formal peace talks between the two sides.

Farooq, who visited Northern Ireland last month to study the Irish peace process, said resolution of the Irish conflict could be the way forward for Kashmir too.

A landmark agreement in 1998 sought to end the Irish conflict, which killed more than 3,600 people. The power-sharing accord created a Northern Ireland Assembly and last July, the Irish Republican Army downed its arms.

Lanka bombs rebel base in new strike

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan jets bombed a Tamil Tiger naval base in the north of the island on Thursday in a third consecutive day of air strikes despite United Nations calls for an end to the fighting.

The military said the Tiger base in the rebel-controlled Mullaitivu area had been destroyed in the bombardment, which followed a similar raid in the east on Wednesday.

It has vowed to dislodge the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam from their eastern stronghold, accusing the rebels of firing on them despite a 2002 ceasefire that international monitors say now exists only on paper.

The aerial bombings have become the latest flashpoint in the fighting between military and Tiger rebels who want to carve a separate homeland for minority Tamils in the north and east.

A Sri Lankan soldier was killed and two others wounded by a roadside landmine detonated by Tamil rebels, military and police officials said yesterday.

"An army road patrol came under terrorist claymore mine attack" in northeast Sri Lanka, a police spokesman at Vavuniya, 256km north of the capital Colombo, said.

Separately, a defence ministry spokesman in Colombo said a soldier died in the attack and two were hurt. He blamed the incident

on the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The attack came as Army Commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka and Air Chief Marshal Donald Perera visited the embattled east Wednesday to discuss troop deployments.

On Tuesday, the UN urged both sides to stop fighting and to protect civilians after it said an air strike by government forces earlier in the day in northwestern Sri Lanka had killed 14 people. Six of the dead were children, the rebels said.

But the military denied hitting civilian settlements in that raid in Mannar district, and accused the Tigers of spreading false information to win international sympathy.

More than 3,000 people were killed in ambushes, suicide bombings and clashes last year alone, a level of violence that stoked fears of full-scale renewal of a civil war that claimed more than 65,000 lives over two decades.

On Thursday, the Tamil Tigers detonated a mine in the northern town of Vavuniya, killing a soldier and wounding two, a military spokesman said.

Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe said troops were clearing a stretch of road in Vavuniya on foot when the blast occurred.

Fragmentation mine explosions have increased in recent weeks, as fighting intensifies in the east and north of the island.

79 Maoists surrender in C India

AFP, Raipur

Seventy-nine Indian Maoist rebels have surrendered to authorities in the insurgency-racked central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, police said yesterday.

The Maoists laid down their arms at a ceremony at police headquarters in Raipur, capital of Chhattisgarh, one of the Indian states worst hit by the leftist insurgency and home to many of India's indigenous people, or adivasis.

Chief Minister Raman Singh said the surrender late Wednesday was part of a new state government "surrender policy" aimed at bringing Maoists back into the political mainstream, and called it a major success in tackling the insurgency.

Blasts kill 5 in Afghanistan 20 insurgents die in fighting

AFP, Kandahar

Five Afghan militiamen were killed and four others were injured when their vehicle struck a roadside bomb in volatile southern Afghanistan, a senior military official said Thursday.

The militiamen, hired by the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) to help with security, were killed Wednesday in southern Uruzgan province's Taliban-dominated Charchino district, Afghan general Rahmatullah Raufi said.

Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi called AFP from an unknown location and said that the landmine was planted by Taliban rebels.

"We had put the mine to target

the foreign and Afghan troops. It was detonated by a remote control device," Ahmadi, who often calls media to claim attacks on behalf of the Islamist Taliban, told AFP.

Taliban loyalists have been waging violence against President Hamid Karzai's US-backed government and tens of thousands of Western troops hunting the militants down.

Afghan officials, including Karzai, have alleged that militants are crossing the border from Pakistan to carry out such attacks.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz arrived Thursday in Kabul to hold talks with the Afghan government amid a new row over the proposed fencing and mining of the two countries' joint border by

Pakistan.

Some 4,000 people -- including 1,000 civilians, but mostly rebels -- died last year in insurgency-related unrest.

Meanwhile, Afghan and foreign troops killed 20 rebels, including two commanders, in operations against militants in southern Afghanistan, officials said Wednesday.

Seventeen, including the commanders, were killed in the southern province of Helmand in a three-day operation that wrapped up Monday and involved Afghan and Nato-led troops, interior ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary told AFP.

About 4,500 British troops are in Helmand serving with Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf).

Myanmar releases 3,000 prisoners

AP, AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government on Wednesday freed nearly 3,000 prison inmates, including about 50 political prisoners, according to media reports and a human rights group.

Some 50 political prisoners have been freed in Myanmar under an amnesty granted to 2,800 inmates to mark the nation's Independence Day.

About 20 of those freed from prisons around the country are NLD members, party spokesman Nyan Win told AFP. Another 30 were student leaders or other pro-democracy activists, he said.

Myanmar, also known as Burma, gained independence from Britain on Jan. 4, 1948, after more than 120 years of colonial rule. The country's military junta took power in 1988 after crushing a pro-democracy movement. In 1990, it refused to hand over power to a democratically-elected government.

Win Mya Mya of the National League for Democracy party said about 20 political prisoners were freed. At least two party members

Zaw Win, 47, joint secretary of the Mandalay chapter of the party, and Tun Kyi, 42, were among those who gained their freedom. So was Aung Naing, 36, a student activist.

All three told the Associated Press they would continue their fight for democracy.

Prison department officials in Yangon said prominent political prisoners, including the National League for Democracy's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and her deputy, Tin Oo, were not released. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals from their superiors.

Party officials also said several aged and ailing political prisoners are still being held, including 76-year old Win Tin, a well-known journalist, and Dr Than Nyein, an elected National League for Democracy lawmaker, who is ill.

"We welcome the release of prisoners but we are very disappointed that elderly, sick and long-term prisoners are not among those released today," said the party's spokesman, Nyan Win.

West is environmentally wasteful: Manmohan

Developing world cannot afford to ape the West

REUTERS, Chidambaram

Slamming the West for its "environmentally wasteful lifestyle", Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called on Wednesday for industrialised nations to look at alternative energy sources to save the environment.

"We, in the developing world, cannot afford to ape the West in terms of its environmentally wasteful lifestyle," Singh said at a science conference in Chidambaram, 195 km south of Tamil Nadu's capital, Chennai.

"Equally, developed industrial economies must realise that they too must alter their consumption patterns so that few do not draw upon so much of the Earth's resources."

Experts say that, as global emissions rise, the Indian sub-continent will be one of the world's regions most seriously affected by climate change, meaning more frequent and more severe floods and droughts, more disease and poor crop yields.

Addressing more than 5,000 scientists, Singh said India's energy security demanded the development of affordable sources of renewable energy.

"We have invested billions of rupees in developing a range of energy sources. Be it hydel (hydro) power, thermal or nuclear power, we have to improve the productivity of investments already made," he said.

New environment-friendly technologies being developed to cut carbon emissions must be shared and made available to all so that the planet could be saved, he said.

"This must be a shared effort ... an effort that enables the poor to improve their quality of life, their well-being, their consumption levels without being forced to pay the price for the profligacy and excessive consumption of the rich."



PHOTO: AFP

Members of the National League for Democracy Party (NLD) observe a minute of silence to mark the 59th anniversary of Myanmar's independence from Britain at NLD headquarters in Yangon yesterday. Some 50 political prisoners have been freed in Myanmar under an amnesty granted to 2,800 inmates to mark the nation's Independence Day, the opposition National League for Democracy said.