



PHOTO: AFP
Taher Daghayes, brother of Omar Deghayes - a prisoner at the US detention camp in Guantanamo - delivers a speech next to his mother Zohra Zewawi (2-R) and other human rights activists during an event demanding the closure of the US prison in the base on January 10th in Guantanamo, Cuba.

Indian troops launch Ulfa crackdown

REUTERS, Dinjan

Thousands of combat troops fanned out yesterday in the mountains and jungles of India's restive northeast to hunt down separatist rebels, blamed for killing dozens of migrant workers in the past week.

The crackdown, which started on midnight on Wednesday, was spread across Assam and two other northeastern states, and aimed at catching or killing rebels of the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) and destroying their training camps.

"Intensified operations against militants and extensive area domi-

nation by our troops in the region have begun," said Major-General NC Marwah, a senior military commander at Dinjan, 570 km east of Guwahati.

Authorities say militants belonging to the Ulfa, which is fighting for the liberation of tea- and oil-rich Assam, are responsible for killing 72 people since Friday, nearly all of them Hindi-speaking migrants from eastern India.

Dozens have been wounded in the attacks, the worst strikes by rebels in the state since 2003.

The attacks sparked panic among Hindi-speaking people, causing thousands to flee the state in packed buses and trains.

The rebel group, one of the more than half-a-dozen major insurgent outfits in India's isolated northeast, has not admitted responsibility for the killings.

The group accuses New Delhi of exploiting Assam's resources while doing little to develop the state, and flooding it with non-Assamese people.

On Thursday, troops in battle fatigue, some wearing black bandanas, moved throughout Assam as well as neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya.

Some moved on foot while others patrolled roads in armoured vehicles fitted with machine guns.

US raid Iran consulate in Iraq: 5 detained

6 Iraqis killed in Baghdad attacks

AFP, Tehran/ Baghdad

US troops raided Iran's consulate in Arbil in northern Iraq and arrested five staff members, an official at the Iranian foreign ministry was quoted as saying yesterday.

"In this attack, five of the consulate staff have been arrested by the American troops. They have also taken some documents and properties," the semi-official news agency Fars quoted the unnamed official as saying.

"In the US occupiers' attack (on) Iran's general consulate in Arbil, the raiders have broken the gate of the office and arrested the consulate's guards," the official added.

An official at the Iranian foreign ministry told AFP investigations were

under way.

US military spokesman General William Caldwell said on December 27 that US forces had detained two Iranian nationals among eight people rounded up on suspicion of weapons smuggling in a raid in the Iraqi capital.

The two Iranians were later handed over to Iranian officials in Baghdad.

The Iranian consulate at Arbil was set up in 2006 after agreement between Baghdad and Tehran to facilitate cross-border visits of their citizens.

Earlier six Iraqis were shot dead, including five police officers, in Baghdad attacks on Thursday just hours after US President George W Bush declared he would send more

than 20,000 new troops to Iraq.

The five policemen, in civilian clothes and off duty after leaving work, were killed when gunmen ambushed them in al-Khadra neighbourhood in western Baghdad, said a security source and a medical official at the Yarmuk hospital.

Another man was killed and two others wounded when armed men barged into a money changer's outlet in downtown Baghdad, a security source said.

The attacks came just hours after Bush announced he was ordering another 21,500 American troops to Iraq and warned the Baghdad government that it must do more to battle the sectarian warfare that killed thousands in 2006.

'100 civilians killed in US airstrikes in Somalia'

No top al-Qaeda suspects die in raid: US official

AFP, Mogadishu/ Nairobi

Clan elders and residents in southern Somalia said yesterday that about 100 civilians were killed this week in US and Ethiopian airstrikes on suspected al-Qaeda targets in the region.

There was no way to independently confirm the toll, and it was unclear if it referred to the same areas hit by at least one US air raid on Monday, and by other attacks believed to have been launched by Ethiopian helicopters.

None of the three top al-Qaeda suspects in Somalia sought by the United States were killed in a US airstrike this week in southern Somalia, a senior US official said Thursday.

"The three high-value targets are still of intense interest to us as well as other al-Qaeda affiliates,"

the official said.

Sheikh Abdullahi Ali Malabon, an elder in the Afmadow area, said 100 bodies had been counted.

"We have sent a team to assess the casualties there and they have confirmed more than 100 people killed," he told AFP by phone from the remote area. "Many others were wounded but we don't have an exact number."

Closer to the Kenyan border, between the villages of Afmadow and Dholey, residents and elders also spoke of at least 100 civilian deaths but stressed they had only yet accounted for 29 bodies, some burned beyond recognition.

"I was with a team sent to the bombardment areas near Dholey to bury the dead, what I have seen was really terrible," Absuge Mohamed Weli, a Dholey resident

told AFP.

"I counted 29 dead people, some of them burned so they could not be identified, and we have buried them," he said. "A lot of people were also wounded."

"I have seen more dead bodies in the forest, I recognized some of them and they were local civilians," Weli said. "They were killed while keeping their animals. I have also seen animals, most of them cows, dead in villages."

It was not immediately clear if the Dholey and Afmadow estimates included the same reported deaths.

"We estimate about 100 innocent civilians have been killed," said Dholey elder Moalim Adan Osman. "Some are still missing and I think their bodies are somewhere in the forest."

"The airplanes have bombed

large areas and the whole zone is jungle and no one can classify what is inside," he said. "They have bombed the nomads in the area indiscriminately."

Ethiopia, which has troops in Somalia backing the country's transitional government, said Wednesday that Monday's US strike had not caused any civilian casualties but did not mention raids conducted by Ethiopian forces.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said the US bombardments instead killed only eight "terrorists" and wounded five, who were then captured by his troops, while another seven of the 20 extremists targeted may have escaped.

But Mohamed Ibrahim Guled, an Afmadow resident, said "a lot" of civilians had been killed by the US raid.

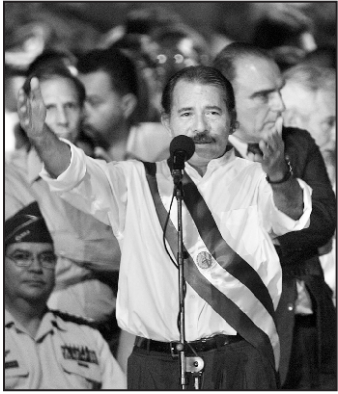


PHOTO: AFP
New Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega delivers a speech during his installation on Wednesday in Managua. Ex-Sandinista guerrilla leader and US nemesis Ortega was sworn in as president almost 17 years after being voted out of office, in another gain for Latin America's ascendant left.

US Cold War foe Ortega back in power in Nicaragua

REUTERS, Managua

Former Marxist guerrilla and Cold War veteran Daniel Ortega returned to power in Nicaragua on Wednesday and celebrated another leftist election triumph in Latin America with US foe Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

Ortega, 61, was sworn in almost 17 years after voters, tired of a vicious civil war with US-backed Contra rebels, threw him out of office.

The Sandinista leader won a November presidential election on promises to fight the hunger, poverty and corruption that previous free-market governments failed to end.

A beaming Chavez, who gives economic aid to Nicaragua, Bolivian President Evo Morales and Ortega held their hands up in a joint victory salute at a rally attended by tens of thousands of cheering leftists.

Bush fails to sway Iraq doubters

AFP, Paris

Allies of President George W Bush rallied to his new strategy for Iraq but Britain still plans to reduce its troop presence and widespread doubts remain about Iraq's future.

Britain, Australia and Japan -- which supported the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 -- backed the new Bush plan which involves sending more than 21,000 extra US troops in a bid to quell the insurgent-fuelled strife in Iraq.

But none offered new military help, while China and Germany, leading opponents of the invasion, expressed doubts that the new measures would stabilise Iraq.

Britain, the main US ally in Iraq and second largest troop contributor, said the US decision to send

more troops and other measures showed the US determination to defuse the conflict.

"We hope that this joint effort to resolve this very difficult security situation will indeed succeed," British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett said in London.

But she added that Britain had no intention of increasing its troop presence in Iraq, which is scheduled to be cut this year.

"We're not in the same position" in Shiite Muslim southern Iraq as the United States in the rest of the country, said Beckett.

US troops have faced the more serious violence as they confront a Sunni Muslim insurgency backed at times by foreign Islamist fighters and also spiralling Shiite-Sunni violence.

The British government hopes to withdraw many of its 7,200 troops deployed around the southern city of Basra by the end of this year.

Beckett declined to be drawn on a report in The Daily Telegraph, which said Britain will pull out around 2,700 troops before June. "It does depend on how things go in Basra," Beckett said.

Australia's Prime Minister John Howard also supported Bush, whose measures were announced in a speech to the nation late Wednesday.

"It was a very clear, calm and, above all, a realistic speech, but he didn't underestimate the challenge, he admitted some mistakes have been made and made it very clear what is at stake," he added.

"An American or Western defeat in Iraq would give an unbelievable

boost to terrorism."

Howard also said Australia would not increase its current 1,400 troop strength in Iraq.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who is on a visit to Europe, pledged in a telephone conversation with Bush that his country would continue to provide reconstruction aid to Iraq, the Japanese embassy in Berlin said.

Japan sent troops to Iraq in its first foreign deployment to a country in conflict since World War II. That mission ended in July, although Tokyo still lends air support.

"The Japanese government praises this announcement as additional efforts by the US government to stabilize Iraq," Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso said in Tokyo.

Rice, Gates head to Cong for grilling

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defence Secretary Robert Gates are expected on Capitol Hill Thursday to face tough questions on President George W. Bush's plan to send more troops to Iraq.

The two officials, who will testify one day after Bush announced new war plans for Iraq that include sending 21,500 more soldiers, can expect a grilling from opposition Democrats who now control both chambers of Congress.

Just minutes after Bush's nationally-televised late Wednesday speech the Senate's number two, Democrat Dick Durbin, slammed the plan in his party's official response.

"It is time for Iraqis to stand and defend their own nation. The government of Iraq must now prove that it will make the hard political decisions, which will bring an end to this bloody civil war," Durbin said.

In his speech the president "acknowledged what most Americans know: We are not winning in Iraq, despite the courage and immense sacrifice of our military. Indeed the situation is grave and deteriorating," Durbin said.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian supporters from Fatah movement hold up posters showing images of the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat wearing his trademark Keffiyeh and that of current leader Mahmud Abbas as they gather to take a bus trip from the West Bank town of Hebron to Ramallah to attend a rally yesterday.

Abbas vows to prevent clashes with Hamas

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas assured tens of thousands of supporters yesterday that he was determined to prevent further factional clashes with rival Hamas after weeks of internecine bloodshed.

"Preserving national unity and preventing internal clashes is our priority," Abbas told a crowd of flag-waving, chanting supporters of his Fatah party in central Ramallah.

"Spilling Palestinian blood is a red line that should not be crossed and those who do so are criminals," he said, a white and black traditional keffiyeh scarf wrapped around his neck.

"The sole language that should prevail is dialogue," he said.

Tens of thousands of mostly youthful Fatah supporters waved Palestinian flags and yellow Fatah standards as they gathered in chilly temperatures under sunny skies, next to the mausoleum of Fatah founder and long-time leader, Yasser Arafat.

The demonstration -- held to mark the date of Fatah's first opera-

tion against Israel 42 years ago that's considered as the party's founding -- was the second huge rally held by Fatah in less than a week, aimed at demonstrating a massive show of force to rival Hamas after weeks of clashes.

It followed a huge gathering of Fatah supporters in Gaza city on Sunday.

Violence between Fatah and Hamas has killed more than 30 people and wounded more than 100 in the volatile Gaza Strip in less than a month.

In the West Bank, there has been a string of tit-for-tat abductions by sympathisers of both groups, as well as sporadic shooting.

Over the past several days the armed clashes in Gaza have subsided but a war of words has raged between the two rival factions.

The internecine Palestinian bloodshed has drawn condemnation from abroad and from within.

Jihad Horani, 42, a Fatah militant from Ramallah attending Thursday's rally said he regretted the standoff between his party and Hamas.