

15 Afghan policemen die in Taliban attacks

AFP, Herat

New attacks reported in Afghanistan Sunday took to 15 the number of police killed in a week-end of violence, including in the country's west, which has seen a surge in unrest.

Eight policemen were killed in a six-hour battle in the western province of Farah Saturday when Taliban fighters ambushed a police patrol, the provincial police chief told AFP Sunday.

A US-led coalition statement said 17 rebels were killed in the fighting, but Sayed Agha Saeqeb said only four of their bodies were recovered from the battlefield.

Another policeman was missing, Saeqeb said. "The fighting ceased when we sent reinforcements," he added.

The attack occurred near the centre of Bakwa district, which was overrun by Taliban late February. The militants were in control for less than a day before Afghan security forces drove them out.

The coalition said it assisted the police with close air support and sent forces to secure the district centre. Four police vehicles were burned by insurgents, it said.

On Sunday a suicide car bomb exploded near police returning from Bakwa, wounding one of the men, Saeqeb said. Intelligence services had been tipped off beforehand and security forces were on the lookout for a bomber.

On Saturday five policemen were killed when a roadside bomb tore through their vehicle in Ghazni province, another insurgency-plagued region in southern Afghanistan, a district official said.

Two policemen were also killed in the southern province of Helmand on Saturday when a suicide bomber blew himself up close to their convoy, police said. The Taliban claimed responsibility.

Afghan security forces are a main target for insurgents, and about 150 have been killed so far this year, according to an AFP tally based on reports.

Most of the violence has been in the south, the birthplace of the Taliban movement, but attacks in the previously quiet west have stepped up in recent months.

Police in early April raided a religious school in Farah, near the town of Bakwa, and arrested 22 people, alleging the madrassa was involved in organising Taliban suicide attacks and was being used as a "terrorist centre."

Ten killed in fresh Lankan fighting

AFP, Colombo

A landmine detonated by Tamil Tigers killed three police commandos in eastern Sri Lanka yesterday while seven suspected rebels died elsewhere in the embattled region, military officials said.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) attack blew up a police Special Task Force vehicle in Batticaloa district also wounding three officers.

Security forces shot five rebels in the north of the island early Sunday while two more were killed in Batticaloa, said the military.

The renewed violence came after the Sri Lankan navy said it killed at least a dozen Tiger rebels in a battle off the northeast coast on Friday night.

The LTTE has waged a 35-year campaign for independence that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

More than 4,800 people have been killed in the latest upsurge of fighting that began in December 2005.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani supporters and lawyers surround the vehicles of suspended Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry upon arrival at the Lahore High Court in Lahore yesterday. Tens of thousands of people gave Pakistan's sacked top judge a resounding welcome as he took his protest to Lahore for the first time since he was fired by President Pervez Musharraf.

Russian partnership with West in peril

AFP, Brussels

Russia and the West are at odds over a growing number of issues, from Kosovo to the US missile shield, and the discord may undermine their cautiously built post-Cold War partnership, Nato diplomats say.

In an effort to ease bilateral strains, Moscow and Washington have reached an unusual agreement to have their foreign and defence ministers meet, particularly to address Russian concerns about the missile shield.

But the differences go far beyond this one, albeit important, problem.

Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov, a favourite to replace President Vladimir Putin next year, said Thursday that Moscow would no longer inform partners when it moves troops across its territory.

The announcement, the application of a freeze Putin made on the Soviet-era Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, was the first concrete move in what are tense and possibly changing times.

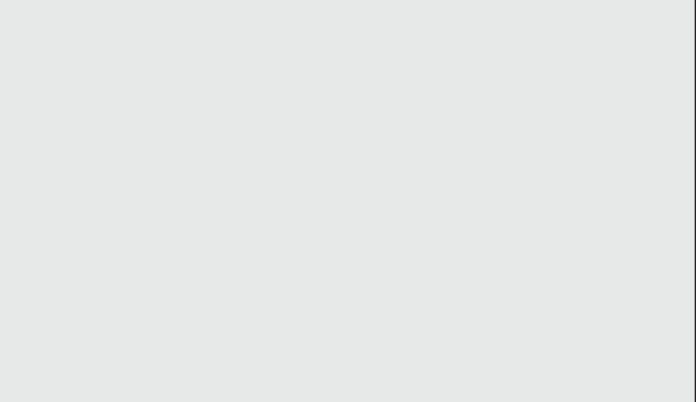
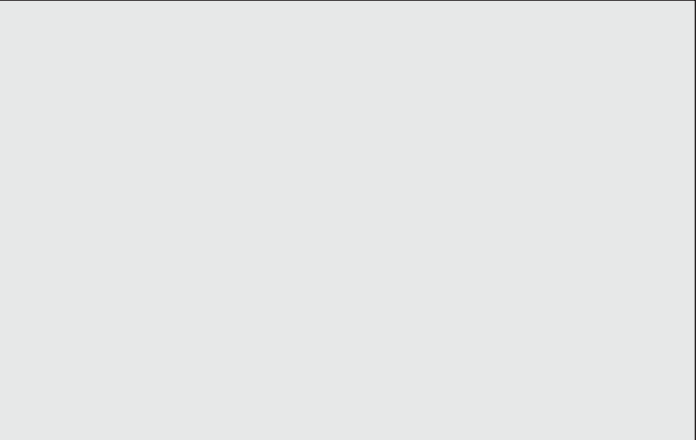
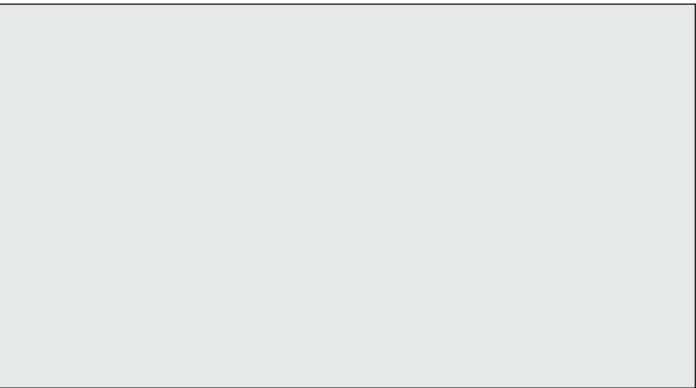
In the past, the West "accepted the rhetoric" when Russian leaders denounced the United States or Nato, but it's not so easy any more," said a diplomat at the military alliance.

At a meeting of Nato foreign ministers in Norway late last month, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, reacting to the Russian treaty freeze, said it was vital to keep relations between Moscow and Washington calm.

"We must avoid an escalation," he said.

But a Nato official said "the tone between the (Nato) allies and Russia has now hardened."

"It seems that we've gone back to times before the Nato-Russia Council, just as we are getting ready to celebrate its fifth anniversary in Moscow and Saint Petersburg," he said, in reference to Moscow's regular talks with Nato.



Turkey parliament fails to elect president due to quorum crisis

AFP, Ankara

Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, the sole candidate in presidential elections, said yesterday he would withdraw after parliament failed for the second time to vote him into office.

The re-run, first-round ballot was cancelled by parliament speaker Bulent Arinc after two separate roll calls showed the number of lawmakers present was below the 367 -- two-thirds of the house -- required to make the vote valid.

Gul has yet to formally remove his name, but made it clear that the repeated failure of his Islamist-rooted ruling party to secure a quorum had left him little choice.

"I will withdraw," he told journalists in parliament.

The presidential election has triggered a crisis in secular Turkey, amid widespread opposition to the idea of a former Islamist taking on the largely ceremonial but highly symbolic office.

On the eve of Sunday's scheduled vote, tens of thousands of protesters turned out across Turkey to call on Gul to withdraw his candidacy, amid concerns that he and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) are intent on undermining the separation of religion and state.

It was the third large-scale secularist demonstration in a month over the choice of the next head of state. Two similar protests gathered more than a million people in April in Istanbul and Ankara.

Gul's first attempt to get elected was on April 27, when he failed to get the required two-thirds backing of parliament by just 10 votes.

Opposition parties boycotted that vote and the Constitutional Court later annulled the result, ruling that the required quorum of 367 MPs had not been achieved.

The opposition also boycotted Sunday's re-run with effectively the same result.

After the court annulled the April ballot, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP called for early general elections which were subsequently brought forward from November to July 22.

Along with early elections, the AKP is seeking to push a wide-ranging package of constitutional amendments through parliament.

Chief among them is a reform that would see the head of state elected by popular suffrage instead of parliamentary vote. The president would also serve a once-renewable five-year-term, instead of the current single, seven-year mandate.

On Saturday, Gul said he hoped to be his party's candidate in a direct election, telling the British Financial Times daily: "Support for me is 70 percent (among the public). That is why we have decided to go to the people."

Gul's candidacy has sparked conflict between Erdogan's government and the army, which has toppled four governments in as many decades and sees itself as the guardian of the country's secular principles.

Taliban trash Pak-Afghan 'peace jirga'

AFP, Kandahar

The Taliban dismissed yesterday a planned traditional gathering between Afghanistan and Pakistan on the insurgency, saying it was an attempt to "deceive" ordinary Afghans.

President Hamid Karzai announced last week that the neighbours would hold the gathering, called a jirga, on August 1.

It is intended to bring together about 700 tribal leaders, politicians and academics from both sides to find a way to tackle the growing Taliban-led insurgency.

"It's an attempt by Karzai's government to deceive people," said a Taliban statement read over the telephone by one of the rebels' spokesmen.

"But Afghans know this and will never accept it. Afghans are thinking about freedom and will gain their freedom," read the spokesman, Yousuf Ahamdi.

The Taliban, toppled from government in late 2001, claim that Karzai's government is a stooge of the West and that the thousands of foreign troops in the country to help bring security are "invaders."

Scotland's nationalists in coalition talks

AFP, London

The Scottish National Party, which backs pulling Scotland out of the UK, was to continue talks on forming a coalition government Sunday, despite an early setback in its search for a willing partner.

The Liberal Democrats, the SNP's most obvious coalition partner, unanimously agreed not to support a referendum on independence from the United Kingdom -- the SNP's raison d'etre.

The SNP won a landmark victory in Thursday's elections, overtaking British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party by one seat in the Scottish Parliament, the first time Labour has been runner-up in one of its traditional heartlands since 1955.

"We have to keep the history in mind. Both sides will have to agree on the actual ground position," India's Defence Minister A.K. Anthony told reporters following his first visit to the Siachen region.

The Indian army, which has occupied most of the high-altitude battlefield since 1987, wants "iron-clad" evidence of existing troop positions to dissuade Pakistan from moving its soldiers forward in the event of a pull-out.

Pakistan fears that setting out its positions would be tacit acceptance of India's claims to Siachen and the area as a whole.

"Pakistan will have to demarcate the actual ground position line -- both on the ground as well as on the map -- before any headway is made," said the minister, who took the post last year.

"Our position from the beginning is very clear that before any forward movement is made, we must authenticate the actual ground position line."

Pakistan must reveal positions on glacier

AFP, New Delhi

India said Saturday it will not agree on the withdrawal of troops from a glacier in disputed Kashmir until Islamabad reveals its positions there, the Press Trust of India reported.

Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan have held many rounds of talks on the withdrawal of troops from the 6,300 metre (20,800-feet) high Siachen glacier without narrowing their differences.

Ex-Iranian nuke negotiator charged with spying

AFP, Tehran

A former Iranian nuclear official who was part of a moderate negotiating team has been charged with spying on Iran's controversial atomic programme, the semi-official Fars news agency reported.

Tehran's judiciary has confirmed that Hossein Moussavian is being held under the auspices of the intelligence ministry at Tehran's notorious Evin prison after his arrest last week.

But this is the first indication that Moussavian, who served under reformist president Mohammad Khatami until 2005 and is also close to ex-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, has been charged with espionage.

Taliban hostage deadline 'after French govt formed'

AFP, Kandahar

Afghanistan's Taliban said it would decide on the fate of a French man and three Afghans after a new French government is formed, following presidential elections underway yesterday.

Yousuf Ahmadi, a spokesman for the group, said Saturday the decision would be made once the result of the election, which closes at 1800 GMT, is known.

But on Sunday he told AFP: "The deadline has been extended until the end of the election and formation of the new government. We'll decide after that."

He could not give a time frame.

15 dead in China coal mine blast

AFP, Beijing

Fifteen miners have died in a gas explosion in a northern China coal mine, state media reported on Sunday, in the latest accident to strike the country's notoriously dangerous coal mining industry.

The explosion occurred Saturday afternoon, trapping 30 workers, 15 of which have now been confirmed dead, Xinhua news agency reported, quoting rescuers at the scene.

Rescue efforts continued Sunday for the remaining 15 miners trapped in the colliery in Shanxi province.



PHOTO: AFP
Presidential elections candidate Ramos Horta (C right) hugs East Timorese President Xanana Gusmao as they meet at the campaign site in Dili yesterday. Two radically different candidates are set to contest in East Timor presidential election set for May 9.

