

# 9 die as Afghan cops clash with protesters

## Two dozen Taliban killed in fighting

AFP, Mazar-E-Sharif

Nine people were killed and 32 wounded in northern Afghanistan yesterday when police opened fire to break up a violent protest by a warlord's supporters, a doctor and a witness said.

The incident happened as stone-throwing followers of ethnic Uzbek warlord and former Northern Alliance commander Abdul Rashid Dostam rallied to demand the removal of the governor of Jowzjan province.

"We have nine people dead in the hospital and we registered another 32 wounded," Simia Jan, the director of the main hospital in the provincial capital, Shibergahan,

told AFP.

Jan said most of the wounds were from bullets. Some of the injured were discharged from the hospital after initial medical care.

Witness Jan Ali told AFP by telephone that hundreds of people were protesting against governor Juma Khan Hamdard and hurling rocks at the governor's office when police opened fire.

A spokesman for the governor, however, said that some of the protesters were armed and that it was they who opened fire as they tried to storm the governor's office.

"Police were in a defensive position. When the protesters opened fire police had to defend themselves and as a result three

police were wounded," said spokesman Rohullah Samoon.

Meanwhile, two dozen Taliban militants were killed when US-led forces backed by warplanes repelled an ambush on a supply convoy in Afghanistan, the coalition said Monday.

A 10-hour gunbattle broke out after two roadside bombs hit the convoy of 24 trucks in volatile Helmand province on Sunday, killing a civilian truck driver and wounding three coalition troops, it said in a statement.

Joint Afghan and coalition forces called in air strikes after insurgents followed up the blasts with rocket propelled grenades and small-arms fire, the statement said.

# Thousands of low-caste Hindus convert to Buddhism in India

AFP, Mumbai

Thousands of low-caste Hindus seeking to escape the oppression of India's rigid caste system on Sunday embraced Buddhism in a mass conversion.

Some 5,000 Dalits -- those at the bottom of the ancient religious hierarchy who were once known as untouchables -- converted to Buddhism in Mumbai, state capital of Maharashtra in western India, a Dalit group said.

"We estimate that close to 5,000 Dalits have chosen the path towards Buddhism by the end of the day," said Shrawan Gakwad, representative of the Samatha Sainik Dal, a Dalit group.

Large-scale Dalit conversions take place periodically in India, with close to 10,000 changing faith

in October to mark the 50th anniversary of the conversion of their deceased political leader Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar.

Ambedkar, a low-caste Hindu who rose to become a distinguished jurist and played a key role in drafting India's constitution, galvanised Dalits with his public rejection of caste and Hinduism itself.

Sunday's conversion came just two weeks after a Dalit woman was sworn in as chief minister of India's largest state in an unexpected majority win that some saw as a sign of how far the group has come.

But many Dalits say they still face severe discrimination and the conversions are a way to make a fresh start, as well as to draw attention to their plight.



PHOTO: AFP

Hindu Dalits pray during a mass conversion to Buddhism in Mumbai Sunday. Thousands of low-caste and tribal Hindus, seeking freedom from oppression in India's hierarchy-ridden caste system, embraced Buddhism in a mass conversion ceremony.

# 6 killed in Pakistan militant violence

AFP, Peshawar

Taliban insurgents shot dead a military commander and a soldier in northwestern Pakistan on Monday hours after police killed four rebels in a firefight, officials said.

The unrest comes amid mounting concerns about the spread of a Taliban-led insurgency across the border from Afghanistan into Pakistan's lawless tribal belt and nearby regions.

The commander and the soldier died in separate ambushes while travelling on a road out of the restive town of Tank.

Gunmen hiding on both sides of the road sprayed bullets at the vehicle of Mir Wali Wazir, the local commander of a paramilitary unit,

in a morning attack, senior police officer Mumtaz Tareen told AFP.

Hours later, gunmen fired at three more paramilitary vehicles, killing one trooper, a security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Gunfire was still occurring, he added. Witnesses said that some 200 militants had taken positions outside Tank on the road.

Tank, a town of about 100,000 people, was the scene of bloody clashes between Taliban militants and security forces early this month that left eight people dead.

It was placed under curfew last month amid violence triggered by the killing of a militant leader following attempts to recruit school students to fight in Afghanistan.

# Pak PM warns against criticism of military

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's Prime Minister yesterday warned against criticism of the army after the country's suspended top judge issued a veiled attack on the military rule of President Pervez Musharraf.

Premier Shaukat Aziz said the courts should "think about taking action" after a string of lawyers at a seminar attended by Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry on Saturday called on Musharraf to quit as army chief.

Chaudhry -- whose suspension by Musharraf in March has triggered an intense political crisis -- stopped short of naming

the president but warned that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

"It does not suit any Pakistani to speak against the armed forces because it effects our defence, integrity and prestige. We strongly condemn it," Aziz told reporters.

The armed forces had always helped Pakistan in times of need and the lawyers' remarks against them "have hurt the sentiments of all Pakistanis," the premier added.

"The judiciary should now think about taking action on this." General Musharraf seized

power from Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup in 1999 and has broken his pledge to give up his dual role as president-in-uniform.

His opponents say he sacked the independent-minded Chaudhry to weaken the courts as he bids to overturn a constitutional provision that says he should step down as army chief by the end of the year.

About 5,000 lawyers and opposition party members rallied outside the Supreme Court to greet Chaudhry ahead of Saturday's seminar on the independence of the judiciary.



PHOTO: AFP

US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker (L-back) and his Iranian counterpart Hassan Kazemi (2R) hold a meeting on security in Iraq at Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's office in the Green Zone in Baghdad yesterday. Arch-foes Iran and the United States held their highest-level direct official talks in 27 years in Baghdad Monday against a backdrop of mutual recriminations over the chaos in Iraq.

# US negotiator in India to iron out nuke accord

AFP, New Delhi

The lead US negotiator in a landmark deal to allow civilian nuclear technology sales to India arrives in New Delhi this week to try and resolve nagging differences over the pact, officials said yesterday.

"Nicholas Burns is scheduled to arrive in India on May 31" for talks with Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon, a source from the US embassy in New Delhi said, adding the talks would continue until June 1.

US Undersecretary of State

Burns will meet Indian officials to hammer out language to implement the deal, which was agreed on during a visit by President George W Bush to India last year.

The deal aims to reverse three decades of US sanctions on nuclear trade with India, even though New Delhi has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and tested nuclear weapons in 1998.

Efforts to agree on the fine print of implementing the pact have yet to be ironed out.

Earlier this month Burns told

the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank in Washington, that both sides "were 90 percent of the way there" although an Indian official told AFP that differences persisted over New Delhi's demands that it be allowed to reprocess spent nuclear fuel.

India also wanted assurances that Washington would continue to supply fuel for its nuclear plants in the event of New Delhi conducting further nuclear weapons tests, another sticking point in the talks, he said.

# 380 civilians killed in Afghan violence this year: UN

AFP, Kabul

Up to 380 Afghan civilians have been killed in fighting between Taliban insurgents and Afghan and international forces this year, the United Nations said yesterday.

"In the first four months of the year there were in the range of 320 to 380 civilians killed," said Richard Bennett, human rights chief at the UN mission here.

The figures included those killed by international troops and by Taliban attacks, including suicide bombings.

Hundreds more were wounded, he told a news conference in Kabul.

"In addition to deaths and injuries, civilians are affected in many other ways: they are forced to become IDPs (internally displaced persons) and their properties have been destroyed," Bennett added.

# Bhutan holds mock elections

AP, Guwahati

The isolated kingdom of Bhutan took another step toward democracy Monday as voters lined up for the final round of a mock parliamentary election, officials said.

The vote is part of a "dress rehearsal" for a 2008 election in Bhutan, part of a remarkable transformation of the 100-year-old monarchy that is changing the world's last Buddhist kingdom into a democracy.

"Observers from the UN, India and Denmark are monitoring the elections and we expect this final phase of the mock polls to pass off without a hitch," said Kunzang Wangdi, Bhutan's Chief Election Commissioner.

Last year, Bhutan's king declared his intention to step down in 2008, allowing national elections and parliamentary democracy. Under the new plan, which becomes effective after next year's

vote, the king would become head of state and parliament would have the power to impeach him by a two-thirds vote.

The mock election is between the Druk Yellow party, which promises the "preservation of Bhutan's culture and tradition," and the Druk Red party, which would push "industry-led development."

Only 51 percent of the registered voters voted during the mock election's first round of polling on April 21, but authorities hoped Monday's turnout would be larger. Officials said they expected close to 300,000 registered voters to participate out of a population estimated between 700,000 and 2.2 million.

Nepal-based separatists have threatened to carry out bomb attacks in Bhutan during Monday's mock voting, and Bhutanese authorities have deployed soldiers to maintain calm.



PHOTO: AFP

Bhutanese women stand outside a polling station during the final round of mock voting in Pashakha village in the Phuentsholing constituency yesterday. Bhutan held a second "mock election" as a final dress rehearsal for the isolated Himalayan kingdom's transition to democracy next year after a century of royal rule.

# Gunfight breaks lull at Lebanon camp

AFP, Nahr Al-Bared

Sporadic firefights erupted yesterday at a battered refugee camp in Lebanon where the army is besieging Islamists, amid efforts to end the bloodiest internal clashes for decades.

The rattle of gunfire on two occasions during the day reverberated around the Nahr al-Bared camp, prompting troops surrounding the coastal shantytown to fire shells toward the northern and eastern entrances where the Islamists are holed up, AFP correspondents said.

Smoke was seen billowing from the area, the epicentre of the fighting between the army and fighters from the Sunni Muslim extremist group Fatah al-Islam, but calm

later returned.

Hundreds of heavily armed soldiers, backed by tanks, armoured personnel carriers and machinegun-mounted jeeps, surround the north Lebanon camp where several thousand civilians remain trapped without running water, with little food and no electricity.

As the siege entered its eighth day, political tensions were rising because of divisions over how to handle the crisis and a UN vote this week on the creation of a court to try suspects in the murder of ex-premier Rafiq Hariri.

Hariri was killed in a massive Beirut bomb blast in 2005 widely blamed on former powerbroker Syria, which was later forced to end nearly 30 years of military and

political domination of Lebanon.

Lebanon's Western-backed ruling majority has accused Syria of stirring the troubles in the north and blamed it for a string of recent bomb attacks in a bid to block the tribunal. Damascus has denied the allegations.

Troops have kept Nahr al-Bared under siege since Fatah al-Islam attacked army targets on May 20, sparking fierce gunbattles in the camp and the nearby port city of Tripoli which have left 78 people dead.

According to UN estimates, between 3,000 and 8,000 of the 31,000 Palestinian refugees registered at Nahr al-Bared are still inside the camp, while Prime Minister Fuad Siniora said on Sunday that 5,000 remained.

# Curfew slapped on Bhutan refugee camp in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

A curfew was imposed yesterday at a camp in southeast Nepal for Bhutanese refugees following riots that left one dead in police firing at the weekend, a local official said.

"An indefinite curfew has been imposed from Monday noon after demonstrating Bhutanese refugees turned violent and began attacking police," Jaya Mukunda Khanal, chief administrator for Jhapa district told AFP by telephone.

On Sunday a 17-year-old Bhutanese refugee was fatally shot by police after fighting broke out between rival factions at the UN-monitored camp in Jhapa dis-

trict, 280km southeast of Kathmandu.

A United States offer to resettle more than half of the 107,000 refugees, some who have lived at the camp for more than a decade, has created tension between those who want to go to a third country, and others who insist they be given the right to return to Bhutan, the official said.

"The situation is getting tense as the refugees are defying the curfew," Khanal.

Local police said that six officers were injured in clashes Monday morning, and that the police had fired tear gas to try to bring the situation under control.