

US-led airstrike kills 7 Afghan children

Several dozen militants also killed

AP, AFP, Kabul

Seven children were killed in a US-led coalition airstrike targeting suspected al-Qaeda militants in eastern Afghanistan, a coalition statement said yesterday.

Soldiers under heavy attack in southern Afghanistan called in air support during hours of fighting that left several dozen militants dead and two foreign troops hurt, the US-led coalition said yesterday.

The Helmand attack took place 17 kilometres (10 miles) from the centre of the district of Sangin, which Taliban fighters held for weeks before it was retaken by the government and its foreign allies in April.

"As the battle raged on into the night, additional enemy fighters arrived from the west side of the Helmand River to reinforce several enemy positions in a trench line," a coalition statement said.

Coalition helicopters and war

planes dropped bombs on rebel positions.

"The prolonged battle killed several dozen enemy combatants," the statement said.

Two coalition soldiers were hurt. The statement did not give the nationalities of the wounded troopers.

The strike came hours after the deadliest insurgent attack since the Taliban fell in 2001.

Police said Monday they had detained a suspect in connection with the deadly suicide bombing that destroyed a bus full of police instructors at Kabul's busiest transportation hub, killing 35 people and wounding 52.

In an operation backed by Afghan troops, jets on Sunday targeted a compound that also contained a mosque and a madrasa, or Islamic school, in the Zarghun Shah district of Paktika province. Early reports indicated seven children at the madrasa and

"several militants" were killed, and two militants detained, the statement said.

Meanwhile, police detained a suspect in the Kabul bus bombing after he was caught filming the aftermath of the deadly suicide blast, said Ali Shah Paktiawal, Kabul police director of criminal investigation.

The suspect, whose name and nationality were not disclosed, had pictures of the slain Taliban leader Mullah Dadullah in his phone, as well as text messages from a foreign country, Paktiawal said.

Sunday's enormous blast, which raised the spectre of an increase in Iraq-style bombings with heavy casualties, was at least the fourth attack against a bus carrying Afghan police or army soldiers in Kabul in the last year. The bomb sheared off the bus' metal sidings and roof, leaving a charred frame.

India halts suspect's extradition to Britain

AFP, New Delhi

A New Delhi court yesterday suspended the extradition to Britain of a suspect wanted for the rape and murder of a teenage girl after his lawyers lodged an appeal.

The latest ruling came after lawyers appealed the verdict of a lower bench that recommended the extradition of Maninder Pal Singh Kohli, prime suspect in the killing in 2003 of 17-year-old Hannah Foster.

"They stayed the extradition process," prosecuting lawyer Naveen Kumar Mata told AFP here Monday.

"At the next date of hearing we'll file a reply."

The next hearing on Kohli's extradition will take place July 6, Mata said.

Kohli fled Britain days after being named as a suspect. He was arrested in India's remote northeast in July 2004, after Foster's parents had travelled to India and offered a reward for information leading to his arrest.



PHOTO: AFP

Burmese protesters living in exile in India, shout slogans and carry placards as they take part in a demonstration in New Delhi yesterday against the detention of democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi by the country's military ruler.

Thai PM hints at early elections

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand could bring forward a post-coup referendum and general elections scheduled for later this year, army-installed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont said yesterday.

Surayud had earlier promised to hold a referendum on a new constitution in September, followed by legislative polls in December, to restore democracy following last year's military putsch.

"We are looking at the possibility of having an early election, which is a key concern of people outside Thailand," he told reporters.

"We might have a referendum ahead of the target, possibly on August 19, so that the election could be held earlier than planned," he added.

Exactly who will stand in the polls remains unclear after Thai Rak Thai (TRT), the popular party formed by ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was dissolved in May over electoral fraud violations.

The military-appointed Constitutional Tribunal also banned 111 senior TRT members from politics for five years, and the junta-backed parliament has not yet passed a new law which would allow members of TRT to register a new political party.



Royal and Hollande

France's Royal splits from partner

AFP, Paris

Defeated French Socialist presidential candidate Ségolène Royal said on Sunday she has split from her partner, party leader François Hollande, after accusing him in a new book of having an affair.

"I have asked François Hollande to leave our home, to pursue his love interest which is now laid out in books and newspapers and I wish him happiness," Royal said in an interview for the book to be published Wednesday.

Speculation about the couple has been rife for months.

In the book, Royal did not name the other woman in Hollande's life but said she and the Socialist leader "remain on good terms. We talk to each other. There is mutual respect."

She asked that Hollande no longer be described as her "partner" because, she said: "That is no longer the case."

EU moves to bolster new Palestinian cabinet

AFP, Luxembourg

The European Union prepared yesterday to inject funds into the fragile Palestinian emergency government and send aid to people in the strife-torn Gaza Strip, urging Israel to follow suit.

At a meeting in Luxembourg, EU foreign ministers discussed ways of directly funding cabinet leader Salam Fayyad and get aid to Gaza, which was seized by Hamas fighters late last week, without any falling into the hands of the Islamists.

"The signal is that we support 100 percent, politically and financially (Palestinian leader Mahmud) Abbas and his transition government," said Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said the bloc would break with practice over the last year, since Hamas won Palestinian elections, to provide some direct financial aid to the new 12-member cabinet.

"There will be a part of the money that will be direct," he told reporters as he arrived for the meeting.

The EU has long been the biggest donor to the Palestinians but it suffered direct aid to the previous cabinet after Hamas -- which is blacklisted by Brussels as a terrorist organisation -- took office in March 2006.

However the Union has continued to pay hundreds of millions of

euros to needy Palestinian people through a special financing mechanism, which bypasses the Islamists.

Solana said it was important to support Fayyad, a Western-backed independent sworn in to head the cabinet by Abbas after weeks of bitter internecine fighting saw Hamas over-run the narrow strip of coastal land bordering Egypt.

"It's very important that he's able to construct a budget with which he's able to help both" the West Bank and Gaza, where poverty and insecurity has been rife over the last year, Solana said.

"Whenever he does something to help we will do it in both places," he said. "This is very, very important."

Asselborn underlined that "the international community cannot accept that there be two Palestinian states."

EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner warned that European funds could not start flowing immediately because the new government would be hard pressed to effectively control and use the aid.

"It is a matter of financial control and transparency and an emergency government at that moment, I cannot imagine that already there are all the structures," she said.

But Solana said the EU would be able to inject money through a

special account set up with Fayyad when he was finance minister in the previous Hamas-led cabinet.

Gaza, he said, would pose a special problem.

"In order to help the Palestinian people in Gaza we would need some mechanism that would not be direct support," he said.

"We are thinking about the possibility to do it through the agencies of the United Nations or maybe also to use the mechanism that we have in place."

Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was scheduled to take part in Monday's talks in Luxembourg, and the German EU presidency said she would be urged to follow the EU's lead.

"The objective of today's discussion will be to press upon the Israeli foreign minister, who will be at the meeting, that they too need to support the emergency government," said German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

"I think that the Israelis will have to do the transfer of money to the new government," Solana said, after Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert pledged in New York to help avert a wider humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip.

Benazir claims Sharif agreed to a verbal power-sharing deal

AFP, London

Exiled former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto said in an interview published on Monday that she had reached a "verbal" agreement with fellow exiled political rival Nawaz Sharif in which she would have the first chance at running the country.

A senior official within former prime minister Sharif's political party in Pakistan, however, denied that any such agreement had been reached, with the FT quoting him as saying: "The people will decide in fair elections who forms the government."

Speaking to the FT, Benazir Bhutto said: "Nawaz Sharif and I agree. Nawaz says, 'You should be the prime minister for the first five-year term,' and after that five-year term he wants to run."

"So I hope that we can move forward. That's a verbal discussion between us, but that is what he has said to me."

She said that she had struck the deal with Sharif so that the pair could present a united front to put the army back under civilian control.

Benazir Bhutto and Sharif were both prime minister twice between 1988 and 1999, with Benazir Bhutto going into exile in 1998 over corruption cases pending against her and her husband. She faces

arrest and possible imprisonment if she returns.

Sharif's government in 1999 was cut short when General Pervez Musharraf led a military coup in Pakistan -- Musharraf remains the country's president, and the head of the army.

Iqbal Zafar Jhagra, secretary-general of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (N), denied, however, that the deal described by Benazir Bhutto had been reached, with the FT quoting him as saying: "The people will decide in fair elections who forms the government."

Benazir Bhutto also acknowledged in the interview that her Pakistan People's Party had been discussing a potential deal with Musharraf that would allow him to stay on as president so long as he relinquished his role as head of the army.

"We've had discussions, but they have not moved forward ... We've left all options open."

Musharraf insisted last month, however, that neither Benazir Bhutto nor Sharif would be allowed to return to Pakistan ahead of the country's general election, due later this year or early next year.

PHOTO: AFP

Holding a photograph of late Yasser Arafat, Palestinians most of them supporters of the ousted secular Fatah movement in the Gaza Strip, wait to cross the Erez Crossing to enter West Bank from the northern Gaza yesterday.



Sarkozy's party wins, but not in landslide

AP, Paris

President Nicolas Sarkozy's party won a clear parliamentary majority Sunday in elections seen as crucial to his vision for opening up France's economy, although the opposition thwarted a landslide victory by capitalising on voter fears of giving Sarkozy too much power.

Sarkozy's UMP party will face little resistance to the rash of measures he plans to introduce within weeks to make France's sluggish economy more competitive and less protective.

But Sunday's legislative runoff suggests that voters in France, long driven by leftist ideals, wanted to send the hard-driving and US-friendly president a message that his powers are not absolute, and to keep their concerns in mind.

Some have even predicted mass street protests like those that stymied former President Jacques Chirac's efforts to free up the economy or an eruption of violence in France's housing projects if Sarkozy goes too far, too fast.

"The French showed they did not want to give all of the power to Nicolas Sarkozy," former Justice Minister Elisabeth Guigou, a Socialist, said Sunday night.

Sarkozy's party and its allies won 346 of the 577 seats in the National Assembly, which was fewer than the 359 seats the UMP used to have. The opposition left took a better-than-expected 226 seats total, led by the Socialists' 185 seats a considerable improvement to the party's 149 seats in the last parliament.

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Iran considering fresh US talks on Iraq

AFP, Tehran

Iran is considering an Iraqi request for fresh talks with arch-foe the United States on security in the war-torn country, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said yesterday.

"We are considering the request from Iraqi officials and we will give our response once we've finished our considerations," Mottaki was quoted as saying by the ISNA news agency. "These considerations will take another week or two."

Iran and the United States on May 28 held their highest-level public contacts in 27 years, with Tehran calling for US troops to be pulled out of Iraq and Washington accusing Iran of stoking the insurgency.

However, the talks in Baghdad between Iranian ambassador to Iraq Hassan Kazemi Qomi and his US counterpart Ryan Crocker on Iraq's

security appeared to achieve no major breakthrough.

Mottaki last week appeared to express readiness to continue the talks, during a visit to Tehran by Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih.

The May talks only aimed at restoring security to Iraq and did not veer into other contentious issues such as Iran's nuclear programme and the wider situation in the Middle East.

Relations have been chilled

further by the detention in Iraq by US forces of at least five Iranian officials who Tehran insists are diplomats.

The United States severed relations with Iran in 1980 after Islamic revolutionary students took over its embassy in Tehran, and any exchanges since then have normally been marked by mutual animosity.

With battle lines drawn for the Presidential elections, the NDA yesterday came out in support of Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat as an independent candidate against UPA-Left nominee Pratibha Patil, but its key constituent Shiv Sena remained ambiguous on backing him.

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The Shiv Sena, which has taken an "ambiguous" stance on supporting Patil, however, reserved its stand on backing Shekhawat, saying it will take a decision on Tuesday. The Sena, the oldest ideological ally of the BJP, favours top posts for Maharashtra.

"The Shiv Sena will be taking a decision tomorrow, its foundation day," senior BJP leader Sushma

Swaraj said, quoting Sena leader Manohar Joshi, who attended the meeting.

There was no immediate word from the Vice President, and those close to him saying he was waiting for reports from Chennai, where leaders of the Third Front were holding a conclave on the Presidential election.

"A public figure of eminence, high repute, unmatched credentials, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat has discharged his latest responsibilities as the country's Vice President and Chairman of the Rajya Sabha entirely beyond party affiliations and with impeccable secular credentials," Vajpayee said in an obvious reference to the Left's condition that a Presidential candidate needed to be totally secular.

Noting that Shekhawat combines a lifetime's experience of dedicated public service with rare qualities of head and heart, Vajpayee said, "The NDA is unanimously of the view that Shekhawat as a non-party and an independent candidate would be the most appropriate choice."

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