

Taliban overrun Afghan district

Nato-led forces kill 100 people in 3 days

AP, Kandahar

Taliban militants overran a district in southern Afghanistan and are pushing for control of another key area, sparking fierce clashes with Nato and Afghan forces that have left more than 100 people dead over three days, officials said yesterday.

Hundreds of Taliban fighters launched raids on police posts near the strategic town of Chora in Uruzgan province Saturday, forcing Nato, backed by fighter jets, to respond. Fighting was continuing Tuesday, and some officials reported there have been dozens of civilian casualties.

Also late Monday, Taliban occupied Miya Nishin district in neighbouring Kandahar province, said provincial police chief Esmatullah Alizai. Authorities were planning an operation to retake the remote area, he said.

The insurgent push in the south appears to be the biggest Taliban offensive of the year and marks a change in tactics.

Until now, militants have relied largely on suicide and roadside bombings this year as Nato forces have escalated their operations to root them out. Violence has swelled, claiming about 2,400 lives during 2007, according to an Associated Press tally of figures from Western military and Afghan officials.

Maj Gen Jouke Eikelboom, director of operations with the Dutch military, said Monday that Karzai and the Uruzgan governor sought military support after the attack on the police posts.

"It has been a contested area for some number of months," said Maj. John Thomas, a Nato spokesman. "(The Taliban) are making an effort right now to establish control in that area," he said, predicting more fighting in coming days.

Thomas said he could not pin down the number of fighters that Nato troops were up against but that the battle was not over. "There's reason to believe that the situation on the ground is still unstable," he said.

Precise casualty figures were not available because of the continued fighting, though two Afghan officials said more than 100 people have been killed, including at least 16 police. A Dutch soldier also died, and three others were wounded.

A summary of fighter jet activity from Sunday sent out by the US Central Command hinted at the ferocity of the battles, detailing at least eight aircraft dropping bombs or firing on the area.

Afghan officials said Taliban fighters sought shelter in civilian homes and that Nato bombers targeted them.

Nearby in Kandahar, Taliban

occupied the district of Miya Nishin late Monday, said provincial police chief Esmatullah Alizai. Authorities were planning an operation to retake the remote area, he said.

Thomas said that Nato-led troops stand ready to help Afghan government actions in the area.

Reports of civilian deaths in from the fighting in Uruzgan were coming from various quarters.

One wounded man, Janu Akha, at the main Uruzgan hospital told The Associated Press that 18 members of his family had been killed.

Mullah Ahmidullah Khan, the head of Uruzgan's provincial council, estimated the clashes in Chora killed 60 civilians, 70 suspected Taliban militants and 16 Afghan police.

"I have talked to President Karzai and asked him to send helicopters to ferry the wounded to Kabul," he said.

An official close to the governor who asked not to be identified when talking about preliminary estimates, said 70 to 75 civilians were killed or wounded, while more than 100 Taliban and more than 35 police were killed.

Assam sounds flood alert

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Guwahati

The Assam government on Tuesday sounded an alert after heavy monsoon rains and flash floods inundated more than a hundred villages, displacing nearly 150,000 people.

"A general alert has been sounded across the state with a central control room set up to monitor the flood situation with the rising level of all major rivers leading to floodwaters inundating hundreds of villages," said Bhumidhar Barman, state revenue, relief and rehabilitation minister.

According to a Central Water Commission bulletin, the Brahmaputra river is flowing above the danger level in at least seven places in Assam.

Sarkozy reshuffles French cabinet

AFP, Paris

President Nicolas Sarkozy yesterday shook up his cabinet, putting a woman in charge of the French economy for the first time and naming a new government number two, after his party lost seats in parliamentary elections.

The right-wing president moved Jean-Louis Borloo from the finance ministry to become head of an environmental super-ministry. He replaces Alain Juppe, a former prime minister who had to resign when he failed to win a seat in Sunday's vote.

Christine Lagarde replaced Borloo at the finance ministry, becoming the first woman to hold the post, while Michel Barnier took over from Lagarde as agriculture minister.

Pakistan summons UK envoy over Rushdie award

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan summoned the British ambassador to the foreign ministry yesterday, officials from both sides said, amid mounting anger at the award of a knighthood to author Salman Rushdie.

British High Commissioner (ambassador) Robert Brinkley was due to visit the ministry in Islamabad later in the day, High Commission spokesman Aidan Liddle told AFP.

He could not provide any further details.

Pakistan Foreign Office spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam confirmed that Brinkley had been summoned and said that he would receive a copy of resolutions passed by parliament against the knighthood.

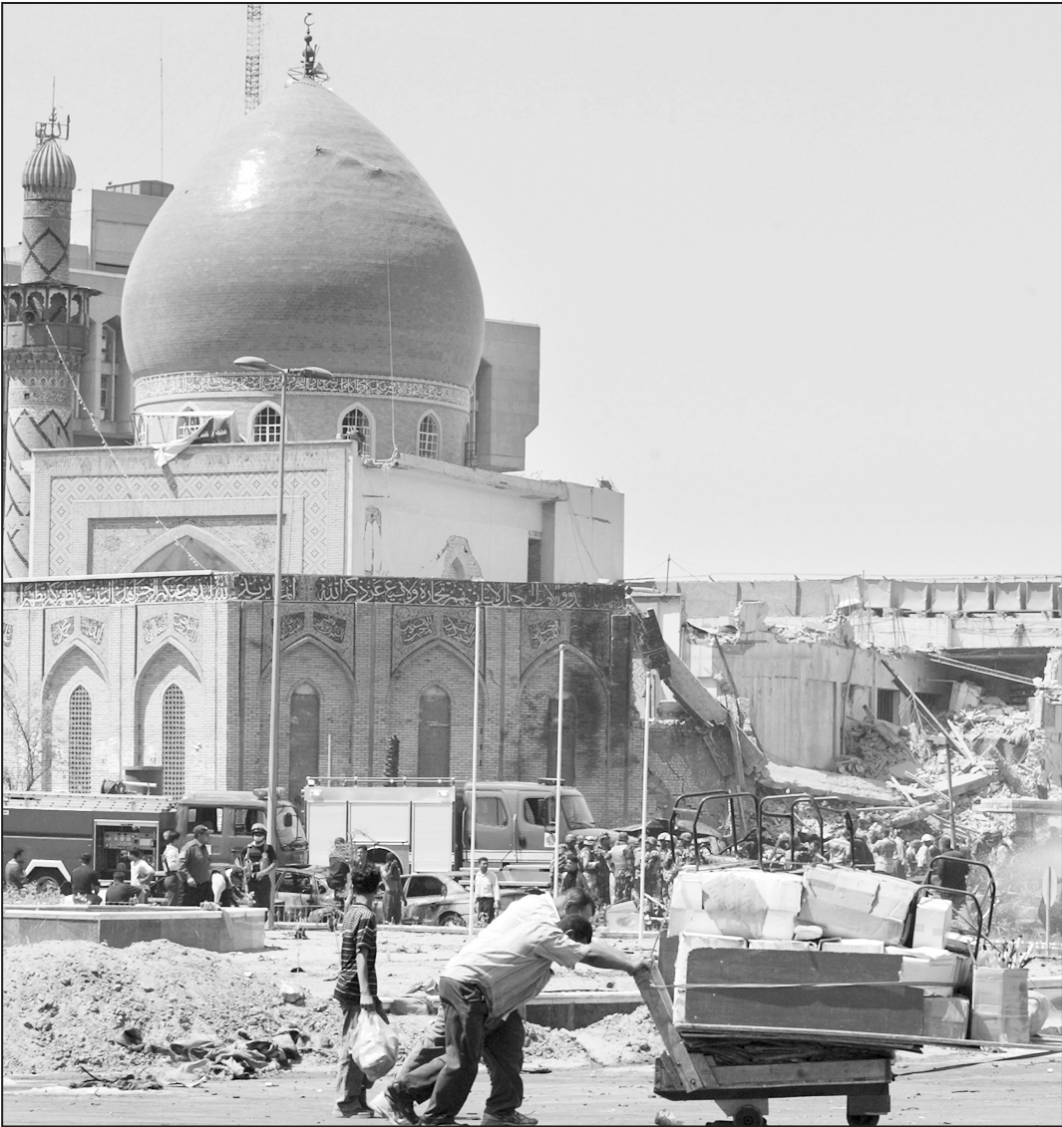


PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi pulls his cart at the site where a truck bomb exploded outside a Shia mosque in central Baghdad yesterday. A parked truck near Al-Kholani Mosque exploded in Baghdad killing at least 75 people and wounding 112 others.

US voices concern over Pak political crisis

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Monday that Washington was concerned about the political crisis in Pakistan and underlined the need for "free and fair" elections.

"Well, of course, we've been concerned about the situation in Pakistan. And any time there is violence, we're concerned about it," she told reporters ahead of talks with her Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Kasuri at her office.

She was asked about the violence and US interests in the region amid the political turmoil faced by President Pervez Musharraf, a key ally in the US "war on terror."

The crisis, the biggest since Musharraf seized power in a bloodless military coup in 1999, was triggered by his suspension of Pakistan's chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry on March 9, which has led to widespread protests.

Days after the suspension, pro- and anti-Musharraf supporters clashed, leaving more than 40 people dead.

Opposition figures say Musharraf ousted Chaudhry to make it easier to be re-elected this year as president-in-uniform, despite the constitution saying he should give up his dual role by end 2007.

US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and his assistant Richard Boucher met Musharraf last week at his army office.

"We have a very intensive engagement with the Pakistani officials at this important time," Rice acknowledged.

Boucher had said earlier that the United States expected that elections should be "free, fair and transparent" and conform to international standards.

But he indicated there was no pressure on Musharraf to hang up his uniform.

Rice also highlighted the need for free elections.

"There are important set of events coming up when there will be elections in Pakistan and the importance of those elections being free and fair as a foundation for a more democratic Pakistan, I think, is very clear and I will discuss that as well with Foreign Minister Kasuri," she said.

Rice however hastened to add

that Musharraf had implemented "important" reforms in Pakistan.

"I think we have to recognise that Pakistan has come a very long way since 2001 in its commitment to try and root out extremism, to try to make reforms, educational reforms, reforms on concerns of women and the like," she said.

But Washington, she said, would continue to prod for more reforms.

"We have been second to none in continuing to press for openness in Pakistan, for the rights of opposition in Pakistan, and for free and fair elections when they are held," she said.

Kasuri said there was nothing unusual about Washington's interest in the Pakistani political situation, especially on the elections, according to Pakistani embassy spokesman Nadeem Haider Kiani after the talks.

"There is nothing unusual about that, we do have excellent relations with the United States," he said.

India completes talks on huge warplane deal

AFP, New Delhi

India has completed negotiations over an order for 126 fighter jets that could cost up to nine billion dollars, Defence Minister AK Antony said Monday.

But the minister did not say which of the Russian, US and European rivals were best placed to win what arms industry sources have described as the world's biggest fighter plane contract in 15 years.

According to industry sources, the leading contenders are the Russian-built MiG-35 and MiG-29, Lockheed Martin's F-16 and Boeing's F-18.

Also in the race to replace India's aged fleet of MiG-21s are Eurofighter's Typhoon, Saab's Gripen and Dassault's Rafale.

Night flights to resume at main Lanka airport

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's only international airport is to resume around-the-clock operations after air raids by the Tamil Tiger rebels forced its closure at night, an official said yesterday.

The civil aviation authorities decided to resume night operations shortly following talks with the military and airport officials, a spokesman for President Mahinda Rajapakse's office said.

"It was decided that we could get back to normal operations at the Bandaranaike International Airport in the next few days," the spokesman said. "Airlines will take a bit more time to adjust their flight schedules."

Military officials said the decision came after better radar was installed to track low-flying aircraft.

French police free hostages held by robbers in Paris bank

AFP, Creteil

French police yesterday freed hostages held by armed robbers in a bank in a south Paris suburb after persuading the men to end their siege.

The suspected robbers initially took six hostages -- four employees and two customers -- but released three women after about two hours in the Credit Lyonnais branch near Rungis market, police said.

Another hostage was freed a short time later, leaving two more in the bank.

Elite police officers negotiated with the hostage-takers and about 1:30 pm entered the building, arrested the men and freed the remaining hostages, who were unharmed.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) holds up the nomination form for Rajasthani Governor Pratibha Patil, the ruling Congress-led government candidate for the forthcoming Indian presidential elections as Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Priyaranjan Dasmunshi assists in New Delhi yesterday.

Sale of Russian fighter planes to Syria alarms Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel is concerned about reported Russian deliveries of advanced MiG-31 fighter planes to its enemy Syria as part of an armaments drive, the top-selling Hebrew daily reported on Tuesday.

The MiG-31, considered one of the best fighters in the world, can carry guided missiles with a range of more than 200 kilometres (125 miles) and is capable of striking 24 different targets simultaneously, YediotAharonot said.

"This information is more concerning when put in the context of massive armaments purchases made recently by the Syrians,"

Yuval Steinitz, an MP from Israel's right-wing opposition Likud party, was quoted as telling the daily.

"If Syria acquires the MiG-31 we can no longer rule out the idea that this country is preparing for war," said Steinitz, a former chairman of Israel's defence and foreign affairs parliamentary committee.

A Russian newspaper reported on Tuesday that Russia has begun delivering five MiG-31E interceptors to Syria as part of an agreement reached this year, and that Moscow also plans to sell Damascus its MiG-29M/M2 dual role fighters.

110 people killed in N Korean explosion Says aid group

AFP, Seoul

A South Korean aid group said yesterday that about 110 people were killed in a gasoline pipeline blast 10 days ago in the northwest of North Korea.

The group, Good Friends, said all the dead perished in flames when the pipeline blew up in Sonchon county in North Pyongan province on June 9.

"Informed sources told us about 110 people were killed in the blast," Noh Oh-Jae, a group official, told AFP. She refused to further identify the sources.

Noh said the disaster occurred

when villagers gathered around a previously cracked pipeline to collect gasoline.

"Someone ignited a flame by mistake, causing a huge explosion that sent flames and smoke billowing up, engulfing people," she said.

Officials at the South's spy agency, the National Intelligence Service, and the unification ministry said they could not confirm the report.

Good Friends said the pipeline carried gasoline from a petrochemical plant at Pihyon, near the border with China, to Taedong county west of Pyongyang.

BANKING ROW OVER US urges N Korea to act quickly

AFP, Beijing

US envoy Christopher Hill called yesterday on North Korea to act quickly on its promises to shut a nuclear reactor, saying a long dispute over frozen funds had finally reached its end.

As Hill wound up an Asian tour aimed at getting six-nation disarmament talks back on track, media reports said North Korea had launched a short-range missile, the latest in a string of small-scale tests.

Hill, the chief US negotiator with North Korea, said Tuesday that North Korean money at the heart of a standoff had finally been deposited at a bank in Russia on Tuesday.

"To my understanding, today it was deposited in North Korean accounts in their bank accounts in Russia," Hill told reporters in Tokyo, his last stop in the region after visits to Mongolia, China and South Korea.

"We're very pleased we've passed this banking issue," Hill said. "I am hopeful that we can get to six-party talks of some kind in early July."

In Seoul, South Korean

President Roh Moo-Hyun echoed Hill's remarks, saying: "The North Korean nuclear issue definitely seems to have entered the settlement stage."

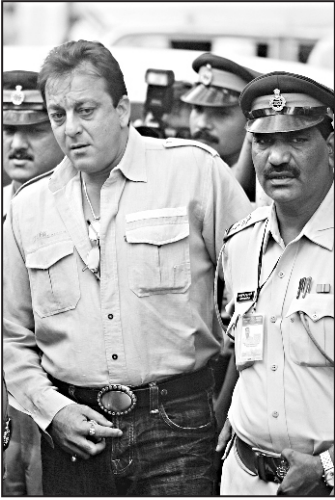
North Korea agreed in February to shut down its Yongbyon reactor, the source of raw material for bomb-making plutonium, in a six-nation deal in exchange for badly needed fuel aid and diplomatic benefits.

But the cash-strapped regime refused to meet an April deadline to comply as it had not gained access to the frozen funds held at the Banco Delta Asia in the Chinese territory of Macau.

The 20 to 25 million dollars had been blacklisted in 2005 on US suspicions of money-laundering and counterfeiting.

North Korea also cited the row to boycott six-nation talks for more than a year, during which it tested an atom bomb in October.

Hill said North Korea now had to comply with the February agreement.



Court delays Sanjay Dutt's sentencing

AFP, Mumbai

An Indian anti-terror court yesterday delayed its sentencing of Bollywood film star Sanjay Dutt following a legal challenge by others convicted in connection with a series of bombings in Mumbai in 1993.

Bollywood's favourite bad guy was in court on Tuesday to hear whether he will be jailed for illegal weapons possession. His lawyer told AFP the sentencing would now likely take place Friday or early next week.

The special anti-terror court has already sentenced 76 of the 100 people found guilty in connection with the "Black Friday" attacks, which were allegedly masterminded by Mumbai's Muslim-dominated underworld in revenge for deadly Hindu-Muslim religious clashes a few months earlier.

But on Tuesday, 15 people who have been found guilty of planting 13 bombs across India's financial capital in March 1993 argued that the anti-terror court did not have jurisdiction to decide sentencing.