

100 'militants' killed in Afghan fighting

25 civilians among the Nato air raid deaths

AP, AFP, Kabul

Fierce fighting broke out around Afghanistan on Friday, with battles in three separate regions killing more than 100 militants, part of a cycle of rapidly rising violence five years into the US-led effort to defeat the Taliban.

The governor of northeastern Kunar province said villagers were claiming that airstrikes had killed dozens of civilians, though he said he could not confirm the report.

But Afghan police said Saturday 25 civilians were killed in air raids in northeastern Afghanistan, including a strike on a funeral, but the Nato-led force rejected the toll.

Residents of a remote area of the northeastern province of Kunar said Friday that around 30 civilians were killed in the strikes on Thursday and Friday but Afghan authorities refused to comment.

In the first official confirmation of the toll, Kunar province deputy police chief Abdul Sabur Alayar told

AFP 25 civilians were killed as were 20 "enemies."

The fighting in the south, west and northeast continues a trend of sharply rising bloodshed the last five weeks, among the deadliest periods here since the 2001 US-led invasion.

More than 1,000 people were killed in insurgency-related violence in June alone, including 700 militants and 200 civilians. More than 3,100 people have been killed in Afghanistan this year, according to an Associated Press count based on information from Western and Afghan officials. Around 4,000 people died in violence last year.

US-led coalition and Nato spokesmen on Friday emphasized that ground commanders had evaluated the terrain to prevent civilians casualties, though Kunar Gov Shalizi Dedar said villagers had reported that 10 civilians were killed in an initial airstrike, and that a second strike killed about 30 people who were trying to bury the

dead.

Dedar said he could not confirm the reports of civilian deaths but that he was not rejecting their validity either. He said around 60 militants died in the battle.

US and Nato officials say Taliban militants threaten villagers into claiming that attacks killed civilians.

"There were some number of insurgents that were killed. We have no reason to believe that any civilians were killed at this time," said Nato spokesman Maj. John Thomas. He said soldiers called in airstrikes on "positively identified enemy firing positions" in a remote area.

Civilian deaths have been a growing problem for international forces here, threatening to derail support for the Western mission. President Hamid Karzai has repeatedly implored forces to take care to prevent such deaths.

Both a UN and the AP count of civilian deaths this year show that US and Nato forces have caused

more civilian deaths this year than Taliban fighters have.

Meanwhile, a roadside blast struck a Nato convoy in southern Afghanistan, wounding four alliance soldiers Saturday.

The Nato convoy was attacked west of Kandahar city, and the four wounded soldiers were medically evacuated to a nearby military hospital, said Maj. John Thomas, a Nato spokesman.

Qari Yousef Ahmadi, a purported Taliban spokesman, said that the convoy was struck by a suicide bomber.

An AP reporter at the site of the blast said that those wounded were Canadian soldiers.

In the country's east, two Nato soldiers died and several others were wounded during an operation Thursday, the alliance said.

The alliance did not release the soldiers' nationalities or the location where the clash and the bombing took place. Most foreign troops in the east are American.

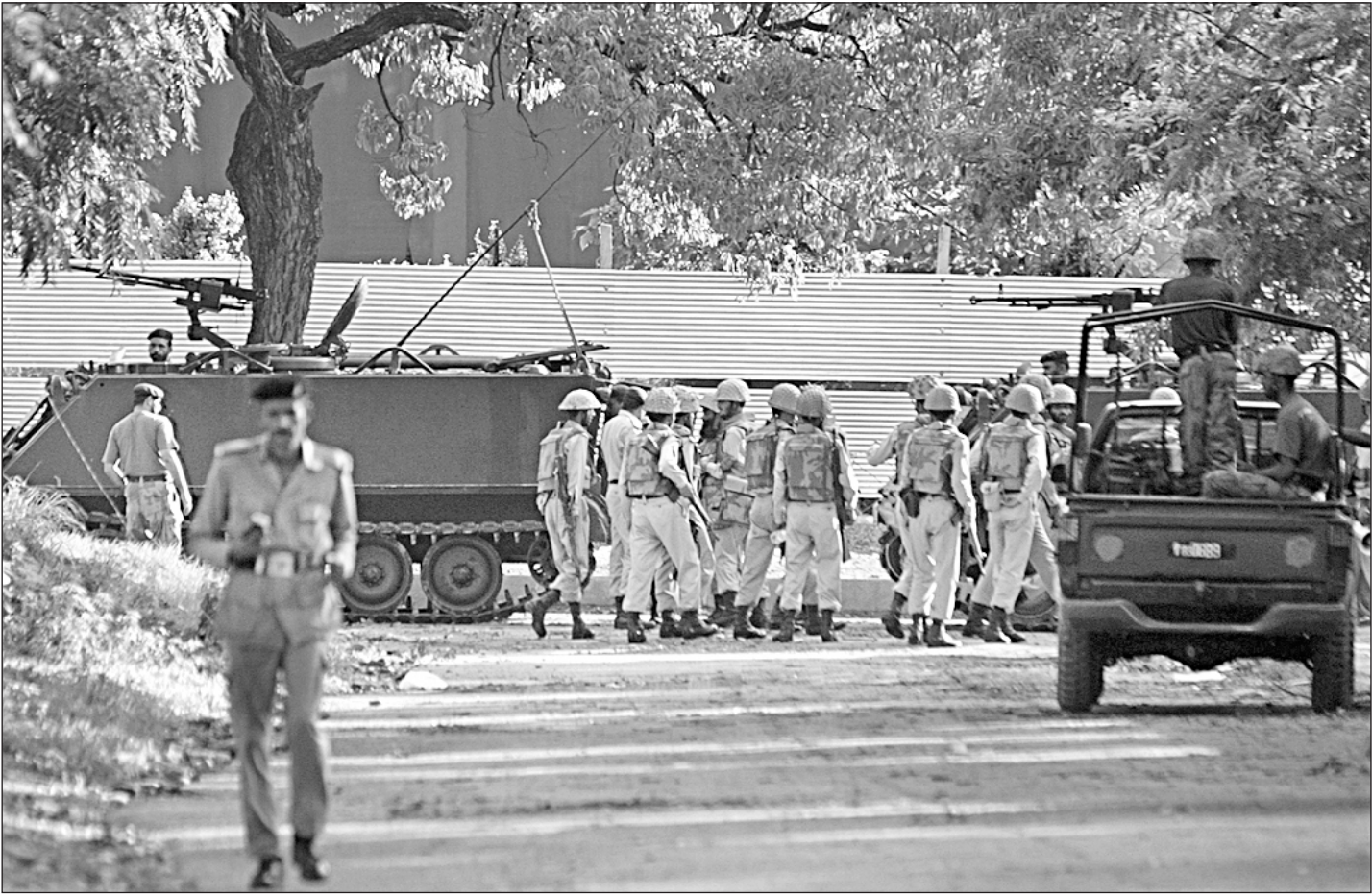


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani paramilitary soldiers prepare for action ahead of a gun battle with radical students of the Red Mosque in Islamabad Friday. Two heavy blasts and gunfire rocked Pakistan's besieged Red Mosque as a dense cloud of smoke rose over the building in the latest clashes.

Musharraf asks mosque rebels to surrender

AFP, Shuram

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf told Islamists besieged at an Islamabad mosque to surrender yesterday, amid growing indications that an attempt to shoot down his plane was linked to the standoff.

Military ruler Musharraf said that the headline students holed up inside the Red Mosque for the past five days must immediately free women and children allegedly being held as human shields, or face death.

"They should not prolong. They should surrender and hand over their weapons, otherwise they risk being killed," Musharraf told reporters in his first public comment on the confrontation.

"Our concern is for children and women and we are showing a lot of patience and restraint."

Fighting intensified at the now

bullet-pocked mosque on Saturday. Fierce clashes erupted at lunchtime while troops blew up the complex's petrol tank during the night, sending flames high into the air.

The firebrand cleric leading the resistance, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, said Pakistani forces had killed 30 female and 40 male students in the siege. The women were buried at the site, he said.

The government says the toll is 19, including a soldier and several civilians.

The mullah said he and his followers had enough rations, arms and ammunition inside the compound to "fight for another 25 to 30 days and we will do that, God willing."

Ghazi also signalled his defiance by saying that he was telephoned by a man who claimed to have shot at Musharraf's aircraft on Friday in revenge for the siege.

"I received a telephone call yesterday from a man I did not know," who offered his "congratulations" before news of the attack on the president became public, Ghazi told AFP by telephone from the mosque.

"He said, 'I fired at Musharraf's plane just a while ago.' He said that Musharraf survived," said Ghazi, the deputy leader of the mosque.

Security officials said earlier they were probing possible links between the mosque operation and the failed bid to shoot down the president's plane as it took off from a military airbase at Rawalpindi, near Islamabad.

Musharraf has survived at least three other militant attempts to kill him.

'Afghanistan, Pakistan agree to boost anti-terror fight'

AFP, Ankara

Afghanistan and Pakistan have agreed on closer cooperation in fighting the Taliban, during talks in the Turkish capital, the foreign ministry announced yesterday.

The agreement between the two countries covers the exchange of information in matters concerning their security. They will also deny refuge to people involved in subversive and terrorist activities, the ministry said in a statement.

In a bid to strengthen ties, politicians, academics and lawmakers are to travel to the neighbouring country more frequently.

The agreement was reached during talks on Friday between Afghanistan's junior foreign minister Mohammad Kabir Farahi, Pakistani foreign ministry official

Riaz Mohammed Khan and Turkey's junior foreign minister Ertugrul Apakan.

Their talks came after the presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan, Hamid Karzai and Pervez Musharraf, met in Ankara in April.

Officials from the two countries are to meet again in Istanbul shortly.

Relations between Islamabad and Kabul, both US allies in the restive region, have become strained over the past years amid accusations that Pakistan was not doing enough to fight the al-Qaeda-backed Taliban.

Taliban fighters launched an insurgency soon after being driven from power in Afghanistan in 2001 in an invasion led by the United States following the September 11 attacks.

Protesters clash over Nepal king's birthday

AFP, Kathmandu

Dozens of supporters and opponents of Nepal's embattled King Gyanendra clashed yesterday as the monarch threw open the palace gates to celebrate his 60th birthday, police said.

Police lined the street leading to the palace as supporters queued to enter the sprawling pink stone compound and meet their revered monarch.

"His majesty has made mistakes in the past but his mistakes are not inexcusable. We should maintain the monarchy because it's a symbol of national unity," 27-year-old Ratna Magar said as he waited in line.

Nine people were injured as the two sides clashed in Durbar Square in the ancient heart of Kathmandu just south of the palace, police said. Two officers were among the injured.

"Royal supporters had gathered to attend the king's birthday when the Young Communist League activists attacked," said police officer Surya KC, adding officers broke up the battles after about 20 minutes.

The palace press office said 15,000 people paid their respects

14 get life for massacre of 116 Indian Muslims

AFP, New Delhi

A court sentenced 14 people to life in prison yesterday for their involvement in the killing of 116 Muslims during a month of rioting that left close to 2,000 dead in eastern India in 1989.

The killings -- the worst single incident in the bout of sectarian violence -- came to light six weeks later, after vultures began circling what appeared to be a cauliflower bed but turned out to be a mass grave.

The men, convicted last month for murder and rioting among other charges, were sentenced to life by a court in Bhagalpur, the district in eastern Bihar state where the killings occurred, the Press Trust of India reported.

Six of the 24 accused in connection with the massacre died during the marathon legal proceedings while another four fled.

Some 1,800 people -- mostly Muslims -- were killed in a spate of clashes and arson attacks that left tens of thousands homeless.

Bomb suspect in UK court on 7/7 attack anniversary

AFP, London

Prime Minister Gordon Brown marked the second anniversary of Britain's first suicide bombings Saturday amid tight security in London and as an Iraqi doctor was due in court after three failed car bombings.

Brown, accompanied by London Mayor Ken Livingstone and his Parisian counterpart Bertrand Delanoë, laid flowers at a memorial garden at King's Cross railway station in memory of 52 commuters who died in the July 7, 2005 attacks.

The low-key ceremony -- Brown did not speak, simply bowing his head for a few minutes in quiet contemplation -- contrasted with last year's programme of commemorations and came with the capital still jittery over security.

Last Friday, two car bombs, including one outside a packed city centre nightclub, failed to go off in London, while the day after, a flaming Jeep Cherokee slammed into Glasgow airport in Scotland.

The first man to be charged over the botched attacks, 27-year-old Bilal Abdulla, was to appear at City of Westminster Magistrates' Court in central London Saturday for a preliminary hearing.

He was charged with conspiring to cause explosions by police Friday night but his full trial will not take place for months.

The charge covers a period from January 1 to July 1, alleging he "unlawfully and maliciously conspired with others to cause explosions of a nature likely to endanger life or cause serious injury to property in the United Kingdom".

It carries a maximum sentence of life.

Abdulla was one of seven people detained in Britain over the attempted attacks. The others remain in custody, while one is under armed guard fighting for his life in hospital after suffering 90 percent burns.

Hundreds of thousands of visitors are likely to flock to London Saturday for one of the busiest weekends in the capital's calendar.

Lankan military kills 15 rebels

AFP, Colombo

Fifteen Tamil Tiger rebels were shot dead as they fled from troops on tractors, the Sri Lankan government said yesterday, while four people were killed elsewhere in the embattled island.

The number of dead in violence on Friday was the biggest one-day toll in weeks in the tropical nation where the rebels are fighting for an independent homeland for minority ethnic Tamils.

Soldiers intercepted a group of Tamil Tigers, killing 15, as they fled the jungle area of Thoppigala in the eastern district of Batticaloa, where fighting had been taking place between troops and rebels, a defence ministry statement said.

"The terrorists were fleeing in two tractors when they were attacked by army commandos," the military said.

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels shot dead a Tamil man in the northern district of Jaffna on Friday for allegedly having close links with the military, the ministry said.

Two Tamil Tiger rebels were killed in northern Vavuniya district on Friday during clashes with government troops, the military said.

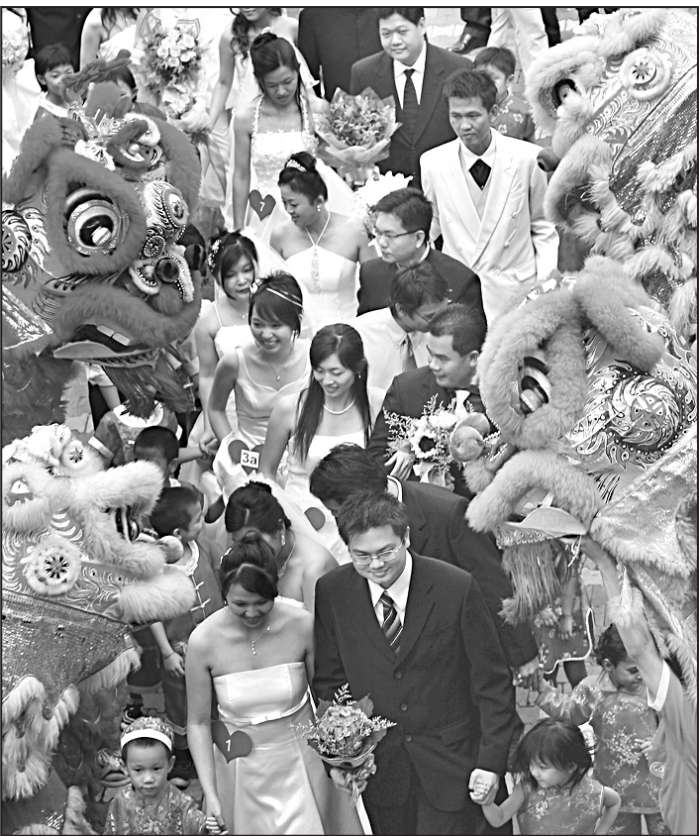


PHOTO: AFP

Couples walk past a troupe of lion dancers as they enter a ceremonial hall during a mass wedding at a Buddhist temple in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Fifty couples tied the knot at a Buddhist temple in the nation's capital on the auspicious date of 07.07.07, which appears once every hundred years.

'Blair wanted Diana to be ambassador for Britain'

AFP, London

The forthcoming diaries of Tony Blair's former press chief contain details about how the former British prime minister wanted princess Diana to be an ambassador for Britain, the Daily Mirror said Saturday.

Blair secretly met the princess before and after he became prime minister in 1997, the newspaper said, quoting a "well-placed source" who had seen parts of its former political editor Alastair Campbell's book "The Blair Years".

But the meetings were so sensitive they had to be held away from the heart of British political life, Westminster, because as a member of the publicly apolitical royal family Diana could have been accused of politicking, it said.

"Campbell's diaries tell how Blair and Diana always held their private meetings away from Westminster," the source was quoted as saying of the book, which is published Monday.

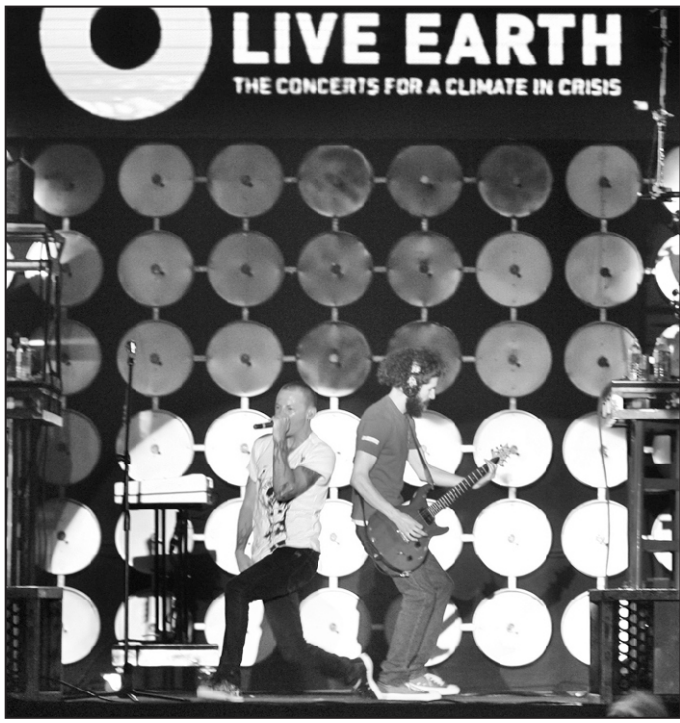


PHOTO: AFP

US rock band and Grammy Award winner Linkin Park perform during the Live Earth concert in Tokyo yesterday. The Live Earth concerts around the world, supported by Al Gore, are expected to attract an audience of two billion people.

Live Earth audiences urged to go 'green'

AP, Sydney

Concerts in Sydney and Tokyo yesterday kicked off 24 hours of music by more than 150 artists in a round-the-globe series of shows designed to raise awareness about climate change.

Former Vice President Al Gore, whose campaign to force global warming onto the international political inspired the concerts, made a live video appearance from Washington to open the first Live Earth show, on the other side of the world in Sydney.

He took the technology a step further a few hours later, appearing on stage in Tokyo as a hologram to deliver his message.

"Global warming is the greatest challenge facing our planet, and the gravest we've ever faced," he said. "But it's one problem we can solve if we come together as one and take action and drive our neighbours, businesses and governments to act as well. That's what live earth is all about."

For the most part, the diverse range of performers wholeheartedly backed the call, and the organizers promised the huge shows were eco-friendly by using recycled goods and buying carbon credits to offset the inevitable high power bills.

Madonna, Metallica, the Police and Kanye West were among the top-billed acts listed for the biggest concerts, in London and New Jersey, with more modest lineups of mostly local and regional acts at the other venues. Concerts also were being held in Shanghai, China; Johannesburg, South Africa; Hamburg, Germany; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Washington.

In Sydney, an estimated 50,000 people grooved through a set by former professional surfer-cum singer-guitarist Jack Johnson, banged their heads to afro-haired 1970s retro rockers Wolfmother, and awaited the first home performance in more than 10 years by reformed 1980s hitsters Crowded House.

'Much of US favours Bush impeachment'

AFP, Washington

Nearly half of the US public wants President George W Bush to face impeachment, and even more favour that fate for Vice President Dick Cheney, according to a poll out Friday.

The survey by the American Research Group found that 45 percent support the US House of Representatives beginning impeachment proceedings against Bush, with 46 percent opposed, and a 54-40 split in favour when it comes to Cheney.

The study by the private New Hampshire-based ARG canvassed 1,100 Americans by telephone July 3-5 and had an error margin of plus or minus three percentage points. The findings are available on ARG's Internet site.

The White House declined to comment on the poll, the latest bad news for a president who has seen his public opinion standings dragged to record lows by the unpopular war in Iraq.

Two more Republican senators join critics of Iraq policy

AFP, Washington

The tide of Republican defections from President George W Bush's camp swelled yesterday when two more US senators joined the chorus of critics of his Iraq policy, demanding change.

But while expressing sharp disagreement with the strategy of "surging" the number of US troops in Iraq, Senators Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and Judd Gregg of New Hampshire stopped short of backing legislation that would force the White House to begin a drawdown of US troops in Iraq.

"It should be clear to the president that there needs to be a new strategy," said Alexander told The Los Angeles Times. "Our policy in Iraq is drifting."

Gregg, who up to now had belonged to the camp of Iraq hard-

liners, said in an interview with the same newspaper that attempts to put down the Iraqi insurgency with higher numbers of US troops "don't seem to be making a lot of progress."

It is vital to have "a clear blueprint for how we were going to draw down," he said.

The new cracks in the Republican front opened just three days after Bush urged Americans to support his policy of maintaining 159,000 US troops in Iraq, arguing that if they were to quit Iraq prematurely, al-Qaeda terrorists would bring the war to US soil.

Withdrawing troops "based on politics, not on the advice and recommendation of our military commanders, would not be in our national interest," the president told members of the West Virginia Air National Guard as they celebrated Independence Day on Wednesday.