

MOVE TO RESCUE S KOREAN HOSTAGES

Troops surround Taliban hideouts

AFP, Kabul

Troops surrounded Taliban hideouts in Afghanistan yesterday in preparation for a possible rescue mission after militants threatened to kill 23 South Korean hostages by sunset.

Fears for the hostages rose after police recovered the body of a German engineer. The Taliban earlier said it had killed two Germans seized separately from the Koreans, but Kabul and Berlin insisted one of them was still alive.

A special team from Seoul flew into the Afghan capital for talks with officials, ahead of a 1430 GMT deadline set by the Islamic rebels to kill the South Koreans unless the same number of jailed Taliban fighters are freed.

The double hostage crisis is the latest in a series of abductions targeting the 37 countries with forces in Afghanistan. The Taliban have demanded that the 3,000

German troops and 200 South Korean soldiers be sent home.

Seoul reaffirmed that it would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by year's end as planned as it scrambled to free the group of evangelical Christian Koreans, about 18 of whom are women aged mostly in their 20s and 30s.

The Afghan defence ministry said its forces backed by the US-led coalition had taken up positions in the Qara Bagh district of southern Ghazni province where the Koreans were being "held in the hands of enemies of the people."

The soldiers "are awaiting attack orders on suspected areas. Whenever the authorities consider it appropriate they'll launch the offensive," the ministry said in a statement.

The 14,000-strong coalition however said it had not yet been asked to help, although it added that it would support any rescue

operation in the insurgency-hit region if requested.

"There has not been any fighting or engagement yet," defence ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi said.

The Korean Christians were seized on Thursday while travelling on a bus along the highway linking southern Kandahar -- the birth-place of the Taliban -- and Kabul during an aid mission in the war-torn country.

The Germans were kidnapped the previous day along with five Afghans, and a Taliban spokesman on Sunday reaffirmed claims that the rebels had killed all of them after Berlin and Kabul failed to meet tight deadlines for talks.

"We have recovered the body of one German," said Hewas Mohammad Muslim, the police chief of the southern province of Wardak, without specifying the cause of death. "That is all I know at this point."

Japan agrees to UN inspection of quake-hit nuke plant

AFP, Tokyo

Japan has agreed to let UN experts inspect its largest nuclear power plant, which leaked radiation after a powerful earthquake, causing a scare, a report said.

Kyodo News said the industry ministry has told the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) it will agree to the inspection of the plant some 250km northwest of Tokyo.

No officials could immediately be reached late Sunday to confirm the report, which quoted unnamed government officials.

Last Monday's deadly 6.8 Richter-scale earthquake caused a fire for hours at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant, which automatically shut down.

The plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), later said radiation leaked. The company said the amount was far too small to pose a health hazard but has come under criticism for initially underreporting radiation levels.



PHOTO: AFP

People wait to cast their vote outside a polling station in Ankara yesterday during legislative elections. Voters thronged polling stations across Turkey Sunday for snap legislative polls aimed at ending a bitter row over the secular credentials of the Muslim-dominated nation.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean protesters hold up a sign reading "Withdrawal of South Korean troops from Afghanistan" as they stage an anti-war rally at Imjingak park in Paju yesterday. Protesters gathered to demand the safe return of kidnapped 23 South Koreans from Afghanistan and the withdrawal of South Korean troops.

No secret arms deal with Syria: Iran

AP, AFP, Tehran

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman yesterday dismissed as a "media game" recent reports of a secret arms deal with Syria allegedly made in return for an agreement that Damascus would not hold peace talks with Israel.

Mohammad Ali Hosseini refused to provide confirmation of the deal and questioned how the media would know about it if it was confidential.

"This is a media game," said Hosseini during his weekly news briefing. "It is not confirmed."

The Arabic newspaper Asharq al-Awsat reported Saturday that Iran would provide \$1 billion to Syria for

advanced weapons procurement and would assist the country with nuclear research and the development of chemical weapons, with the understanding that Damascus would not negotiate peace with Israel.

The deal was allegedly signed Thursday when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Syria, said the newspaper. Israeli media later rebroadcast the report.

Both Syrian President Bashar Assad and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert have publicly called for renewed peace talks recently, but have clashed over the specifics.

Assad has demanded a guarantee that Israel would pull out of all of the Golan Heights, a strategic

plateau captured from Syria in the 1967 war. He has also demanded a mediator or "honest broker" for the talks. Olmert has refused to commit in advance to a full withdrawal and has indicated a preference for direct talks.

Syria is Iran's closest Arab ally. The two countries have had close relations since 1980 when Syria sided with Persian Iran against Iraq in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

Both countries face US accusations of fueling violence in Iraq and supporting Lebanon's Hezbollah guerrilla group, which Washington labels a terrorist organization. They are also accused of supporting militant anti-Israeli Palestinian groups, like Hamas.

Turks cast ballots for new parliament

AP, Ankara

Turks voted for a new Parliament on Sunday in a contest viewed as pivotal in determining the balance between Islam and secularism in this nation of more than 70 million.

Many people cut short vacations to head home to cast their ballots, and lines at some polling stations were long as people voted early to avoid the summer midday heat. In Istanbul, Turkey's biggest city, traffic jammed some main roads and police officers stood guard outside the gates of schools serving as polling stations.

"My biggest concern is security. I voted for a party which, I believe, will end terrorism and provide security for our citizens," said Remzi Ekinci, a civil servant. He declined to identify his choice because he works for the government.

The new Parliament will face a host of challenges, including a presidential election, violence by Kurdish rebels and a growing divide over the role of Islam in society.

The election was called early to

defuse a political crisis over the Islamic-oriented ruling party's choice of presidential candidate, and the three-month campaign was peaceful. Turkey has made big strides after the economic and political chaos of past decades, but some feared the vote could deepen divisions in the mostly Muslim nation.

Fourteen parties and 700 independent candidates were competing for a total of 42.5 million eligible voters. Campaigning was prohibited on Sunday.

Parties must win at least 10 percent of the votes in order to have representation in Parliament, a high threshold that has drawn some criticism as being undemocratic.

The country has an emboldened class of devout Muslims, led by a ruling party with a willingness to pursue Western-style reforms in order to strengthen the economy and join the European Union. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has presided over strong economic results, including reduced inflation, more foreign investment and average annual growth of 7 percent.

al-Qaeda gaining power, sophistication in Iraq

AFP, Washington

al-Qaeda in Iraq already has its hands full, but US intelligence officials say the militant group's mentors in Pakistan now want to use its formidable resources for attacks on the United States.

The war in Iraq has transformed the al-Qaeda affiliate into a battle-hardened organization with piles of money, sophisticated recruiting networks and some of the world's most experienced and innovative bomb makers, officials and analysts say.

A US intelligence estimate released this week said al-Qaeda "core," the parent organisation led by Osama bin Laden, "will seek to leverage" those capabilities for attacks on the United States.

It offered no evidence that al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is actively involved in such plots, however, and intelligence and military officials say most of its resources are

currently tied down in Iraq.

But Ted Gistaro, the assessment's author, told reporters this week that al-Qaeda typically tries to tap into its affiliates' networks, recruitment pool and financial resources.

"Certainly when it comes to finances, we've seen al-Qaeda pull benefit from the relationship with AQI," he said. "And the concern is: what other parts of AQI might al-Qaeda core try to leverage or siphon off to bolster its own capabilities?"

Analyst say the concern raised in the assessment is new, and may reflect undisclosed intelligence of messages from al-Qaeda core urging AQI to carry out operations in Europe or the United States.

In late April, the Pentagon revealed it had captured a senior al-Qaeda operative, Abd al Hadi al-Iraqi, as he was trying to reach Iraq to manage al-Qaeda operations and possibly plot attacks in the west.

"al-Qaeda in Pakistan is clearly trying to inspire AQI to use its people and resources to mount attacks where they want," said a US counter-terrorism official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

AQI offers two things: money and an elaborate recruiting network, said Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer now with the Saban Centre for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

"The al-Qaeda operation and the insurgency in Iraq is so popular in the Muslim world that there is pretty good evidence that AQ in Iraq is awash in money, that it has more than it can spend," he said.

Its recruiting networks "can also be reverse engineered so you could use them to train someone, send them back to their home, and then use that person for an operation against a target in Europe, in the Middle East, and conceivably, if they have the right passports, against the United States," he said.

Extreme weather hits southeast Europe

AFP, London

Extreme weather hit Europe Saturday as the death toll from a heat wave in Romania, Austria and Bulgaria rose to 18 and hundreds faced another night of misery in flood-drenched England.

A total of 11 people have now died in Romania amid a heat wave, which led to five deaths in Austria and two in Bulgaria.

In England, meanwhile, the problem was not heat but rain, causing the second serious outbreak of flooding within a month.

People in many parts of the country were being advised not to travel, while Prime Minister Gordon Brown stepped in to praise the "superb" work of the armed forces and emergency services tasked with handling the response.

Rail company First Great Western told would-be passengers to stay at home, while thousands of motorists were stranded for hours as motorways in some parts of the

country came to a standstill.

Weather forecasters the Met Office had severe weather warnings in place across a thick band of south-eastern and eastern England.

And in Worcestershire, in the badly hit west central of the country, more than 1,000 people were spending Saturday night in temporary accommodation. Some 2,000 in the region slept away from home Friday night.

Military helicopters have rescued more than 100 people from house rooftops, caravan parks and a bridge as well as strips of land cut off by water since rains hit on Friday, rescue officials said.

At Stratford-upon-Avon in central England, the Royal Shakespeare Company was forced to cancel two performances after its riverside theatre was flooded.

A spokesman for forecaster MeteoGroup said that more storms were looming later Saturday and Sunday, although on a less severe scale.



PHOTO: AFP

Swans paddle past the Northwick Hotel yesterday in Evesham, Worcestershire following the floods that have crippled areas of England. Merseyside Fire and Rescue service have been working on rescuing residents from their homes as the River Avon burst its banks.

China floods claim 74 more lives

AFP, Beijing

Another 74 people have died in floods across China bringing the death toll for the week to at least 156 in one of the deadliest rainy seasons in years, state media reported yesterday.

The latest reported deaths from heavy rains that have spread misery across much of the country included dozens killed in recent days in the mountainous southwestern province of Yunnan, the Xinhua news agency said.

Torrential downpours in the region triggered mudslides, landslides and heavy flooding that also destroyed more than 4,000 homes and ravaged crops, it said.

The Yunnan death toll rose to 65, with reports Sunday of six more deaths.

Four of those were mine workers in Tengchong county who were engulfed by a sudden landslide on Saturday while trying to clear up mud debris loosed by earlier rains.

Two others came as rescuers on Sunday found the bodies of a pair of migrant workers missing in a landslide that swept through their work site on Thursday.

The two bodies bring the toll from that landslide to 29.

At least another eight people have been reported missing in the province.

Mud and rockslides also closed the 176-kilometre (109-mile) Tengchong-Mytikyina highway linking China and Burma.

In far-western Xinjiang province, nine people have been confirmed killed by floods, with two more missing, Xinhua said.

Weeks of torrential rains in several provinces have made this year's summer rainy season one of the deadliest in years.

Meanwhile, flood-control officials in eastern Anhui province warned that water levels in the surging Huaihe River, China's third-longest, could remain dangerously high for at least another 10 days.

Dykes along the river have soaked for three weeks in the highest water levels since 1991, putting them at increased risk of breaching with more rain expected, Xinhua quoted officials as saying.

More than one million people have been evacuated in Henan, Anhui and Jiangsu provinces along the river's course, Xinhua said.