

S Korean talks with Taliban raise hostage hopes

75 Taliban killed in Afghan clashes

AFP, AP, Kandahar/ Kabul

South Korean officials held their first direct talks with the Taliban yesterday as the clock ticked towards a sundown deadline for the lives of 23 Korean hostages held in Afghanistan.

Troops killed at least 75 militants in three separate battles in southern Afghanistan.

The apparently positive development came as the Islamic rebel group said that a German captive was abducted separately from the Korean Christian aid workers very sick and was drifting in and out of consciousness.

The rebel group has called for both Berlin and Seoul to pull their troops out of the war-battered country and for the release of 33 insurgents held prisoner by Afghan authorities in exchange for the hostages.

"We've established direct contact with the South Korean delegation through tribal elders," Taliban spokesman Yousef Ahmadi told AFP by telephone from an unknown location.

"We hope this time the talks have a result," he said.

A deadline set by the Taliban, after which they say they will start killing the South Koreans, expires at 1430 GMT. The rebels, remnants of the hardline regime toppled by US-led troops in 2001, have already extended it twice.

The delegation led by the South Korean ambassador to Kabul arrived Tuesday in the southern province of Ghazni where the hostages are being held, said provincial police chief Alishah Ahmadzai, who was also involved in the talks.

Seoul sent a crisis team into the country on Sunday to push for the release of its captive nationals, most of whom are female.

Nearly 1,000 Afghans slammed the Taliban for the "un-Islamic" abductions in a protest in the southern town of Ghazni, the provincial capital.

"We demand that the Taliban free the hostages as soon as possible. Their acts are against our beloved Islam and our respected culture," said one demonstrator, Mir Mahfooz.

The bullet-riddled body of one of two German hostages seized separately from the Koreans last week was found on a road on Sunday, and the Taliban spokesman said the second was now drifting in and out of consciousness.

"The German is very badly sick. He has got diabetes," Ahmadi said. It was impossible to verify the claim independently.

Meanwhile, in southern Helmand province, Afghan troops

ambushed by militants called in airstrikes and fought back with small-arms and mortar fire, the US-led coalition said. The coalition said at least 36 insurgents were killed in the fighting Monday, but no Afghan or coalition troops were hurt.

In Uruzgan province, police clashed for three days with militants blocking the road leading to Kandahar province, leaving 26 militants and two policemen dead, said Wali Jan, the Uruzgan deputy highway police chief. NATO-led and Afghan army troops joined the battle Tuesday, reopening the road for civilians traffic, he said.

Another 13 suspected militants were killed in Kandahar province, the Defence Ministry said. The battles took place in remote and dangerous parts of Afghanistan, and the death tolls could not be independently confirmed.

Ex-Guantanamo inmate blows himself up to avert arrest in Pakistan

AP, Quetta

A former Guantanamo Bay inmate who led pro-Taliban militants in Pakistan after his release died Tuesday when police said he blew himself up with a grenade to avoid arrest.

Armed intelligence agents cornered Abdullah Mehsud and three other men at the house of a leader of an Islamist political party in the southwestern town of Zhob, police officials said.

"My information is that Abdullah Mehsud killed himself," Zhob police chief Atta Mohammed told The Associated Press. "Thanks be to God that only he was blown up and our men were safe."

Federal Interior Ministry spokesman Javed Iqbal Cheema confirmed Mehsud's death, but provided no details.

The one-legged militant was released from the US jail for terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in March 2004 after he was captured in Afghanistan fighting for the Taliban.



PHOTO: AFP
Bulgarian nurses and doctors hug with unidentified relatives in front of the French presidential plane yesterday upon their arrival at Sofia airport.

Jailed medics released by Libya, flown to Sofia

AFP, Sofia

Six foreign medics jailed for life in Libya for infecting children with the AIDS virus flew to Bulgaria on Monday after being released by Tripoli under a deal brokered with the European Union.

The five Bulgarian nurses and one Palestinian doctor were pardoned on arrival in Sofia by Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov.

The six touched down shortly before 10:00 am (0700 GMT) aboard a French presidential plane together with French first lady Cecilia Sarkozy and EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

The medics were met at the airport by tearful relatives who had supported them throughout their eight-year ordeal, during which they spent three years on death row awaiting execution.

The six medics were arrested in 1999 and convicted in May 2004 of deliberately infecting 438 children with HIV-tainted blood at a hospital in the Mediterranean city of Benghazi. Fifty-six children have since died.

They were originally sentenced to death but that was commuted to life in prison last week after a multi-million dollar compensation deal was hammered out with victims' families.

According to the Gaddafi Foundation run by Gaddafi's son Seif al-Islam, which has been involved in mediating the crisis, the compensation amounts to about one million dollars per child.

Following the medics' release, French President Nicolas Sarkozy stressed that neither France nor the European Union had paid "the slightest financial compensation".

Sarkozy also confirmed at a press conference in Paris that he would head to Tripoli on Wednesday for a "political trip" aimed at helping Libya re-integrate with the international community.

Cecilia Sarkozy and Ferrero-Waldner had flown to Tripoli on Sunday to push for the medics' swift release.

At one point, negotiations appeared to have stalled with Libya setting further conditions, including the normalisation of relations with the EU, as well as EU funding for infrastructure projects such as a cross-border motorway from the eastern border with Tunisia to the western frontier with Egypt.

More cities under threat in Britain's worst floods in memory

AFP, London

The fate of more English cities, towns and villages hung in the balance yesterday as emergency crews built up defences against rising waters during Britain's worst floods in living memory.

The floods produced images of the town of Tewkesbury turned into an island, a helmeted rescuer carrying a baby in a blanket, an elderly woman winched from her home by a military helicopter and people wading through thigh-high waters.

The government's crisis response committee, Cobra, met late Monday and again on Tuesday as some rivers topped levels reached during the floods in 1947, even as meteorologists forecast more rain.

A spokesman for Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who chaired the latest crisis meeting, defended the government's actions amid charges it had been too slow to prepare for floods even though heavy rains had been forecast since last week.

"It was very difficult to predict exactly how the floods would affect the area. These were extraordinary events," Michael Ellam told reporters.

In addition to large swathes of central and western England which have been submerged for days, rising rivers threatened the London commuter town of Reading, the royal castle city of Windsor and Abingdon, an Oxfordshire town.

"The main focus now is on Oxford (and) Abingdon," an Environment Agency spokesman told AFP.

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