

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 who was abducted separately from the Korean Christian aid workers was 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 Yousuf 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 headline 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 Georgy 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.

Libya said it had ordered their release after it was satisfied the conditions it laid down for extradition had been met.

"The matter has been settled. We received guarantees for the normalisation of relations with European countries and for a partnership

agreement with the European Union," a Libyan official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

In Brussels, European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso confirmed that a deal on improving ties had been struck in order to secure the medics' release.

"I told (Libyan leader Muammer Gaddafi) that if this matter were settled we would do our best to further normalise these relations," he said.

Ferrero-Waldner said the release had cleared the way for "new and enhanced" EU ties with Tripoli, but did not go into details.

The EU currently has no bilateral agreements with Tripoli since imposing sanctions on Libya following the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, and has not started negotiations for an accord since UN sanctions were lifted in 2003.

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 reintegrate 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.



PHOTO: AFP

Gloucester resident Norman Aitken walks through his home, which was severely flooded when the river Severn burst its banks due to heavy rainfall yesterday. Residents of Central and Western England face a huge clean up operation after days of heavy rainfall that made thousands of homes unliveable.

Nepali Maoists threaten to pull out of govt

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's former rebels threatened Monday to pull out of a coalition government after a row over a security detail given to their leaders.

"We have sensed a conspiracy against us," said Krishna Bahadur Mahara, Maoist spokesman and minister for communications.

"Of all the 22 ministers only we were given security guards from the ranger battalion, who received jungle warfare training during the insurgency," Mahara told journalists at a press conference in

Nepal's capital Monday.

The Maoists, who left the jungles and hills to enter Nepal's corridors of power after signing a peace deal earlier this year, have been given five ministerial positions in an interim government.

They continue to face accusations that their activists use mafia-like tactics, and the group remains on a US list of terrorist organisations.

While the state was battling the Maoists, Nepal's 90,000-strong army received training and equipment from countries including India, the US and Britain.

The Maoists believe that they have been given guards from an elite ranger unit, which received US training.

"There was no need to send army with sophisticated weapons for our security," said Mahara.

"This move is very suspicious and we were not consulted. We are now seriously considering whether to stay in the government or not," Mahara told journalists.

The army, formerly headed by Nepal's sidelined King Gyanendra, denied Maoist charges that they had allocated different security details to the former rebels.

IAEA to inspect Iranian nuclear site next week

AFP Vienna

The UN's nuclear watchdog agency will next week visit the site of a heavy-water nuclear reactor in Arak, Iran, the agency said yesterday after talks with Iranian officials.

"The inspectors will go early next week to Arak," in central Iran, Olli Heinonen, deputy director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), told journalists.

His comment came after a meeting in Vienna with Iran's deputy national security chief Javad Vaiedi and IAEA ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanieh aimed at finalising a plan "on clarifying the

open issues associated with the scope and content of Iran's (uranium) enrichment programme."

"We had good discussions. We made constructive progress," Vaiedi told the press conference, adding that "the next meeting will be at beginning of August in Tehran."

Iran said on July 13 that it would let IAEA inspectors visit the Arak reactor.

Ahead of the talks, which had initially been planned for Wednesday and Thursday, Soltanieh said UN and Iranian experts would seek to put together a working framework of "precise rules" concerning any inspections of Tehran's nuclear facilities.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis shout anti-US slogans as they demonstrate in Baghdad's Hai-Ur neighbourhood yesterday to protest against the US and Iraqi troops' siege of al-Hussainiyah neighbourhood.

Tigers kill 11 soldiers, 4 village guards

AP, AFP, Colombo

Separatist Tamil militants launched a pair of attacks against government troops in northern Sri Lanka yesterday, killing 11 soldiers in a roadside bombing and four village guards in a raid on their bunker, the military said.

The violence came just days after the government held a lavish ceremony celebrating its recapture of eastern Sri Lanka after 13 years of rebel control there.

Military officials have said the Tamil Tigers, which still control parts of northern Sri Lanka, have been trying to launch new attacks in retaliation.

In the deadlier attack, assailants detonated a bomb or land mine along a road Tuesday as a bus carrying soldiers passed by in northern Vavuniya district, border-

ing rebel-controlled territory, said Lt. Col. Upali Rajapakse, a military spokesman.

The blast tore through the bus, killing 11 soldiers and injuring seven others, a military official said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media. The blast also wounded eight civilians, including three who were seriously injured and had to be evacuated to the hospital by helicopter, the official said.

Hours earlier, a group of Tamil fighters armed with hand grenades attacked a bunker in the Vavuniya area, killing four village guards, said military spokesman Brig. Prasad Samarasinghe.

Village guards are recruited from ethnic Sinhalese villages bordering rebel areas in northern Sri Lanka to protect their homes against attack.