



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani tribesmen gather during a demonstration in Miranshah, the main town in the tribal North Waziristan Friday to observe a black day against Pakistani troop presence in the troubled region.

'100 Taliban killed in US-led airstrike'

AFP, Kabul/ Kandahar

The Afghan government said yesterday it believed more than 100 Taliban may have been killed in an airstrike in the south of the country and did not rule out civilian casualties.

But General Mohammad Zahir Azimi, a defence ministry spokesman, rejected some media reports that scores of civilians were killed or wounded in the US-led coalition strike Thursday in Helmand province.

Azimi said it was unclear how many people had been killed in the attack on a

large gathering of Taliban.

"But the enemy casualty is very high," he told a press conference in the capital, Kabul. "There might be more than 100 killed."

Hospitals in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand, and in the nearby city of Kandahar, said Friday that nearly 40 civilians had been brought in for treatment.

But Azimi questioned this figure, saying: "Even if there were civilians, there were very few of them. Their number would not reach 10."

He added: "How can you distinguish when someone is a civilian or not? When he has his gun laid on the ground, he's a civilian but when he has it on his shoulder, he is not?"

The area had been under aerial surveillance for more than 24 hours before the strike, Azimi said, and images showed there were no women or children in the group.

But hospital officials said Friday that at least two children had been treated for wounds sustained in the strike.

Korea, Taliban prepare for talks to free hostages

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

South Korean and Afghan officials Friday searched for a suitable place to hold face-to-face talks with the Taliban hostage takers, a news reports said.

The Taliban have agreed to meet Kang Sung-zu, South Korea's ambassador to Afghanistan, claiming they can no longer talk to the "insincere" Afghan negotiators.

There is time pressure on the negotiators because two of the female hostages are seriously ill and could die.

The Taliban have demanded the release of at least eight prisoners in exchange for the South Koreans.

"The South Korean government will deal with the crisis with all possibilities open, that includes the possibility of the Taliban changing its demands," Cheong Wa Dae spokes-

man Cheon Ho-seon said in a daily press briefing. He declined to go into more details.

The Seoul government refuses to confirm or deny reports of a direct meeting, instead reiterating it is continuing to maintain diverse "contact" with the Taliban.

It is an established policy of democratic nations that a government only negotiates with a government.

Momentum in Darfur to end violence: UN

AP, United Nations

Momentum is building in the effort to find a political solution to the violence in Sudan's Darfur region, but until hostilities on the ground cease, the quest to find a political settlement "will not succeed," Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a new report.

Ban's warning comes on the heels of UN approval for a joint African Union-UN peacekeeping force in Darfur and as a meeting gets under way this weekend in Arusha, Tanzania, to get Darfur's various splinter rebel factions to agree on an agenda for peace talks.

In his report, given to the Security Council on Friday, Ban said the coming months are crucial for Darfur, but that "as long as hostilities continue in Darfur, efforts to reach a political settlement and achieve durable peace will not succeed."

US Cong to scrutinise nuke pact with India

AFP, Washington

The US Congress has to determine whether an operational agreement of a landmark US-India nuclear deal is legal, the head of an influential House of Representatives panel said Friday.

The statement by Tom Lantos, the Democratic chairman of the House committee on foreign affairs, came as two US arms experts warned that the civilian nuclear agreement was filled with "loopholes" that could be exploited by India to bolster its nuclear weapons programme.

Phoenix mission launched to Mars

AFP, Washington

A US space probe named Phoenix Mars Lander was successfully launched early yesterday from Cape Canaveral, Florida, and began its nine-month journey to Mars, where it will dig for clues to past and present life.

The lander blasted off from Cape Canaveral, Florida, aboard a Delta II rocket at 5:36 am (0936 GMT) in a flawless launch that illuminated the dark night sky.

Phoenix had been originally scheduled to launch on Friday, but the mission was postponed 24 hours after bad weather Tuesday prevented fuelling of the two-stage rocket.

32 civilians killed in Tamil regions

AFP, Colombo

At least 32 Tamil civilians have been killed and another 24 "disappeared" last month in Tamil-dominated areas of Sri Lanka's embattled northeast, the guerrillas said yesterday.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) blamed government forces for the killings as well as the disappearances from the Jaffna peninsula and the north-eastern areas where Tamils are concentrated.

"The worst affected district is Jaffna," the LTTE said, adding that some victims were killed by Sri Lankan military air strikes inside rebel-held territory.

Bush reassures Musharraf over attack warnings

Pak president vows to crush militancy

AFP, Islamabad

US President George Bush telephoned Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf Friday to reassure him after US threats of unilateral action against al-Qaeda on the Islamic republic's soil, Pakistan's foreign ministry said.

But the White House firmly disputed Pakistan's account of the call, which described Bush as telling Musharraf that the threats were "unsavoury" and smacked of "electioneering" ahead of the 2008 US presidential election.

Bush's call to his embattled ally in the "war on terror" came after recent statements from US officials, and Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama, warning of possible US strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas.

"President Bush stated that the United States fully respected Pakistan's sovereignty and appreciated Pakistan's resolve in fighting al-Qaeda and other terrorist elements,"

the Pakistani foreign ministry statement said.

"He said that such statements were unsavoury and often prompted by political considerations in an environment of electioneering. He agreed that such statements did not serve the interests of either country," it added.

But a White House official called that description of the telephone call "not accurate" and stressed that Bush "did not say anything about 'unsavoury' or 'electioneering.'"

"He basically talked about 'I know you've heard different things coming out the system, and you need to know we're going to work together to deal with terrorists,'" said the US official, who requested anonymity.

Islamabad has been angered by a string of what it has called "irresponsible and dangerous" warnings by US officials who claim that Pakistan's tribal belt has become a safe haven for Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. Obama weighed in on Wednesday,

saying that if he is elected president he would order US forces to hit extremist targets in Pakistan if Musharraf failed to act. Islamabad called his comment "sheer ignorance."

At the White House, spokesman Gordon Johndroe said Bush had congratulated Musharraf and Pakistan on the upcoming 60th anniversary of the country's independence.

"Both leaders reaffirmed the strong partnership between their two nations and their commitment to work together to fight terrorism," Johndroe said in a statement.

But Bush's administration has also ramped up the pressure.

Senior US State Department troubleshooter Nicholas Burns said last week that Washington would retain the option of targeting al-Qaeda in the Pakistan-Afghan border areas in some circumstances.

A few days earlier the White House's top counter-terrorism official Frances Townsend caused a stir by

refusing to rule out a similar military incursion.

The comments have been alarming for a close ally that has received billions of dollars in US military aid since abandoning support for Afghanistan's Taliban movement after the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

On the other hand Musharraf made a fresh pledge on Friday to eradicate Islamic extremism from Pakistan, as the latest incident in a wave of militant violence left four rebels dead.

Military ruler Musharraf, who faces US threats of unilateral action against al-Qaeda insurgents in Pakistan's tribal areas, made the vow at a meeting of chiefs in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, a statement said.

"Extremism and militancy are the biggest threat to security of our country and no effort shall be spared to eradicate this menace and ensure sustainability of economic progress," the statement quoted Musharraf as saying.