

# Nato soldier among 24 killed in Afghanistan

## Afghans celebrate Independence Day

AFP, Kabul

Twenty-four people including a Nato soldier were killed in a bloody week-end of Taliban-linked violence across insurgency-hit Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

The soldier with the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) was killed Sunday while escorting a convoy in southern Afghanistan, the force said.

He died from wounds suffered when the convoy was hit by a bomb, which was followed by a firefight with militants, an Isaf spokeswoman told AFP.

"There was an IED (Improved Explosive Device), then there was a firefight. He was injured and later died from his wounds. It was not known if he sustained the wounds from the IED or the gunshots," the spokeswoman said.

Neither the soldier's nationality nor the location of the incident was disclosed. His death brings to 136 the number of international troops killed in Afghanistan this year, according to an AFP count.

Two policemen were killed and two injured when their patrol vehicle was caught in a roadside bomb explosion outside the southern city of Ghazni on Saturday, a police official said.

Also in Ghazni, where the Taliban have been holding 19 South

Koreans hostage for nearly a month, two members of the hardline militia were killed in a firefight. Two policemen and another Taliban fighter were wounded, the official said.

Four security guards from a private firm were killed when a suicide bomber blew his car up on a highway between the southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand — both badly hit by the Taliban insurgency, a police commander said.

"There was a suicide car-bomb against some private guards. Four guards were killed and three others were injured," Helmand police chief Mohammad Hussein Andiwai told AFP.

The guards were providing security for a road construction company in the volatile region, he said.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack. "We did it," said Yousef Ahmadi, a spokesman for the hardline group, in a telephone call to AFP from an undisclosed location.

The incidents followed the killing of 15 people, including 11 civilians, in a suicide attack on a convoy in the southern province of Kandahar early Saturday.

A further 26 people, including 19 civilians and seven security guards, were injured in the attack, the second in two days in Kandahar province.

More than 50,000 international troops mainly operating under the Nato-led Isaf are based in Afghanistan to combat a Taliban insurgency.

Meanwhile, President Hamid Karzai led Afghanistan's Independence Day celebrations on Sunday with a call to the country's young people to educate themselves to preserve their freedom.

Karzai told tens of thousands of people gathered in the capital's sports stadium that Afghanistan's youth should "spend every second of their lives in learning" to maintain the country's cherished independence.

Reiterating condemnation of Taliban attacks on the 88th anniversary of full sovereignty from Britain, he warned there were "still plots against our independence by the enemies of this land."

Karzai denounced "the killing of innocent people — men, women and children," referring to the 15 people, including 11 civilians, killed in a Taliban-linked suicide bombing in southern Afghanistan on Saturday.

Although Afghanistan was never a full colony of Britain, London under a treaty controlled its foreign affairs until agreeing to allow full independence on August 19, 1919.

## India seeks Japan's support for nuke deal

AFP, New Delhi

India will seek Japan's approval for a civilian nuclear pact with the United States and greater investment during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit this week, officials say.

The second high-level contact in less than a year between the Asian countries will also see Abe press India for its support for a partnership between Australia, India, Japan and the United States, analysts said.

Indian officials were upbeat about Abe's three-day visit beginning Tuesday with a senior government official describing him as one of the "most India-friendly" Japanese prime ministers in recent memory.

The conservative leader has always had a special place in his heart for India, repeatedly saying the fellow Asian democracy is a natural ally of Japan, whose ties with closer neighbours are fraught with historical baggage.

Key among the issues for New Delhi during talks with Abe will be support for the India-US nuclear deal, which seeks to bring India into the loop of global nuclear commerce after a gap of 30 years.

Backing from Japan is significant as it is the only nation to have been attacked with nuclear weapons and is also a major civilian atomic power.



PHOTO: AFP

A Thai soldier stands guard outside a polling station during the constitutional referendum in Thailand's restive southern Yala province yesterday. Thais went to the polls to vote on a new constitution proposed by the ruling junta, in a crucial first electoral test for the generals who led last September's bloodless coup.

# Nuke deal strains UPA ties with Left allies

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's Congress-led UPA government and its Left allies are trying their best to bridge differences on a landmark nuclear deal with the United States, but it has already strained their ties, scars of which might stay on for long.

The spat begun when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh dared the Left allies to withdraw crucial support to his government over the already done civilian nuclear deal with US and the row now threatens to spin out of control.

It was for the first time since assuming office three years ago, Singh has thrown the challenge at the Left, which has been steadfastly opposing the nuclear deal with US.

CPI (M) General Secretary Prakash Karat's statement on Saturday that there will be "serious consequences" for the government if it went ahead with operationalising the deal with the US is seen by political analysts here as compounding the problems for the ruling coalition and a hardening of posture by the Left parties which together have 59 members in Lok Sabha and prop up the government.

Analysts say it is now a war of nerves between the UPA government and the Left parties. Both sides have been blowing hot and cold, adopting strident posture one-day and softening it a bit the next day.

If the Left mounted pressure on the government by threatening

"serious consequences", it is now the turn of Congress party led by Sonia Gandhi to meet top leaders of other constituents of the governing coalition to rally them behind the government on the issue of the deal as a counter to the Left parties.

Many in Congress party are happy about the prime minister's tough-talking with the Left, including the challenge to withdraw support, as reported in an interview to Kolkata-based newspaper "The Telegraph". They say the Left had tied the hands of the government on a number of crucial economic and foreign policy issues.

In the economic sphere, the Left opposed the government's move to bring in reforms in insurance sector including raising of Foreign Direct Investment limit, stalled sale of government stakes in public sector undertakings, allowing foreign universities in higher education in the country.

On the foreign policy front, the Left disapproved of engagement with the US particularly in defence and security matters, protested India's vote against Iran's controversial nuclear programme in the International Atomic Energy Agency and India's proposed naval exercise with the US, Japan and Australia next month.

Attempts by Congress and the prime minister to bring the Left round have so far failed. A breakfast meeting between Singh and Karat that was supposed to have broken the bread did not have the desired effect as the Left parties stuck to their stand on the deal.

The Left parties want re-negotiation of the draft agreement to operationalise the deal but the Indian government is clearly against it with the prime minister himself having ruled out re-negotiations.

The ruling combine is also against any discussion on the deal under a parliamentary rule that

entails voting by members arguing it would set a wrong precedent, Congress sources said.

They pointed out that in the past when the Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty or Indo-Soviet agreement was signed and terminated, the Parliament had not ratified those, rather it was only informed about the action.

The questions doing the round in political circles in Delhi are: will the Left finally withdraw support to the government and precipitate a crisis? Is the Left only making a threatening noise?

Analysts say the Left is mulling the timing of withdrawal of support to the government which will not invite the charge of causing the fall of the government against it and at the same time bring adequate political gains.

It is for this reason that Karat on Saturday asked the government to put on hold operationalisation of the deal to allow more discussions on the issue taking into account objections and concerns before taking a final decision.

Knowing fully well that fresh negotiations on the nuclear deal with the US, especially after Washington has ruled out such an exercise, the Left parties' insistence on further discussions on the issue may just be a tactic to buy more time before they actually take any drastic step, say the analysts.

Pointing to the showdown on the deal, CPI General Secretary AB Bardhan had said that the "honeymoon with the government is over and it was time to file divorce papers". However, Karat has a different opinion when he said that although honeymoon is over the marriage goes on. The question is: how long?

# Pak gunship attack kills 15 militants

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistani helicopter gunships pounded suspected militant hideouts near the Afghan border yesterday, killing 15 militants, most of them foreign fighters, the military said.

"The death toll is 15 now. They are all militants, the majority of them foreigners. They are mostly Uzbeks," chief military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad told AFP.

The general confirmed earlier

reports that two women had been killed in the operation targeting two suspected militant compounds in the restive North Waziristan region, adding that they were "members of militant families".

Earlier a local administration official and security forces told AFP on condition of anonymity that two children were killed along with the women when the attack demolished a house near the town of Mir Ali.

"It was a targeted operation against militants," insisted Arshad.

Four helicopters carried out

Sunday's attack, which lasted for more than two hours, the general said.

"The attack was launched after credible reports that some foreign elements were using the compounds as hideouts," said Arshad.

President Pervez Musharraf has recently come under heavy pressure from Washington to do more to curb radical Islamists using Pakistan's remote border regions as a staging post for military training and attacks.

# Iran, IAEA hold talks today

AFP, Tehran

Top officials from Iran and the UN nuclear watchdog will hold a third round of talks today aimed at agreeing guarantees over the contested Iranian nuclear programme.

The meetings come after Iran's ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, said Tehran was "continuing its nuclear programme non-stop and under IAEA supervision," Iranian news agencies reported.

Javad Vaeedi, a deputy head of Iran's national security council, will hold two days of talks with IAEA deputy director general Olli Heinonen in Tehran.

"Tomorrow (Monday) the third round of talks will take place in Tehran," Vaeedi told the state news agency IRNA.

"In this round, which will last two days, the remaining issues in Iran's nuclear case will be discussed," added Vaeedi, the number two to top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani.

The talks are aimed finding agreement between the two sides over aspects of the Iranian nuclear programme where the agency wants more information and allowing for easier inspections of nuclear sites.

One such issue is over the installation of surveillance cameras at Iran's ultra sensitive uranium enrichment plant in the central city of Natanz. Vaeedi said "no final agreement" had been reached.

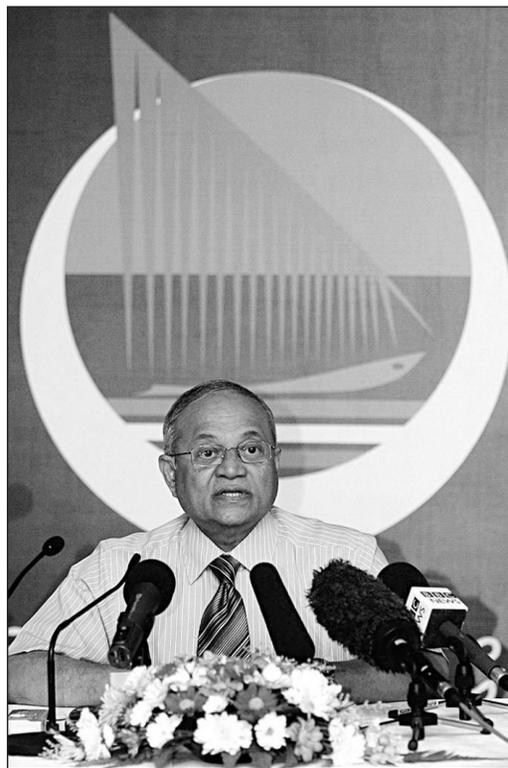


PHOTO: AFP

Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom speaks to reporters during a press conference at the Nasandhura Palace Hotel in the Male yesterday. Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom claimed victory in a referendum on how the Indian Ocean atoll nation should be governed, saying it was a mandate for his reform proposals.