

Wave of violence kills 24 in Afghanistan

AFP, Ghazni

At least 24 people including two police officers were killed in clashes as fresh violence swept through insurgency-hit Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

Eight Taliban militants and two policemen were killed in fighting which erupted late Monday in the southern province of Ghazni where the Taliban have been holding 19 South Korean aid workers hostage for the past month, police said.

The fighting in the province's Qara Bagh -- where the Koreans were kidnapped on July 19 -- and Ander districts was still ongoing Tuesday, provincial police chief Alishah Ahmadzai told AFP.

Two other police were seriously wounded, he said.

Elsewhere in Ghazni, two Afghan civilians were killed and two injured when a landmine apparently intended for the security forces went off under their vehicle on Tuesday, Ahmadzai said.

"The Taliban had planted the

mine, aimed at us," the police commander said.

In separate clashes between Taliban and security forces, seven militants were killed in an operation by Afghan and coalition forces in neighbouring Helmand province Monday, the defence ministry said in a statement.

"Seven terrorists who had infiltrated the area to destabilise the area were killed during an operation by Afghan and coalition forces," the statement said, referring to a 10,000-strong US-led force in Afghanistan mandated to hunt down the Taliban.

The operation took place in Helmand's troubled Sangin district, which has been badly hit by the insurgency.

Also in Sangin, four Afghan army soldiers were injured the same day after their checkpoint came under Taliban rocket fire.

Four other Taliban guerrillas were killed late Monday in the southwestern province of Farah, provincial police chief Abdul

Rahman Sarjang told AFP.

A woman from a nomadic tribe was killed and three members of her family wounded when assailants hurled a hand grenade into their tent in the eastern province of Khost, police said.

It was not known if the attack on the gypsy-like tribe was carried out by Taliban militants, Khost police spokesman Wazir Padshah told AFP.

The gypsy tribes are among Afghanistan's most impoverished residents, frequently moving from one place to another and steering clear of clashes with either the Taliban or the security forces.

A Nato helicopter made an emergency landing near the capital Kabul, the alliance's headquarters here said. It gave no reason for the emergency or whether there were casualties.

The unrest has so far this year claimed the lives of 136 international soldiers from the Nato and US-led forces.

Nepal govt moves to seize king's assets

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government Monday took a key step towards nationalising property belonging to the embattled royal family by creating a panel that will study how to seize the assets, a minister said.

"Monday's cabinet meeting has agreed on the formation of a panel to submit a detailed report about how to nationalise royal property," culture and tourism minister Prithvi Subba Gurung told AFP.

"This report will be submitted within the next 15 days," said Gurung, one of five ministers on the panel.

King Gyanendra, whose business and land holdings are worth millions of dollars, was forced to relinquish absolute rule last year after mass protests organised by a coalition of political parties and the former rebel Maoists.

The fiercely republican Maoists ended a bitter civil war with a peace deal in November 2006 that saw them emerge from the hills and enter government to challenge royal privilege, including the king's control of the army.

Since then, the monarch --

viewed by supporters as the living incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu -- has been stripped of most of his powers, including his position as head of state and army chief.

The fate of his 238-year-old Shah dynasty is set to be decided in November in elections to vote for a body to rewrite Nepal's constitution.

Meanwhile, a senior United Nations official said Sunday he was optimistic that a peace deal between Nepal's former rebel Maoists and the government will hold ahead of polls planned in November.

"We feel very strongly that the process in Nepal is a very positive one and in talking with various groups I am even more optimistic than I was when I came," B. Lynn Pascoe, UN Under Secretary General for Political Affairs, told reporters at the end of a 24-hour visit.

Nepal's former rebel Maoists ended a decade-long guerrilla war late last year by signing a peace deal with the government. Since then, they have been given seats in parliament as well as ministerial portfolios.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents of Chetumal city try to unblock a sewer during Category 5 hurricane Dean lashing yesterday. Mexican authorities on Monday declared a red alert in the eastern region of Chetumal as they braced for the deadly Hurricane Dean powering towards the region.

Indian 'terror' doctor wins Australian visa case

AFP, Brisbane

An Australian court ruled yesterday that authorities were wrong to revoke the visa of an Indian doctor linked to failed British terror attacks, but the government said it was still suspicious of him.

The Federal Court in Brisbane said it would restore Mohamed Haneef's visa in 21 days, clearing the way for him to return to Australia if he wishes.

Haneef's family in Bangalore, southern India, welcomed the ruling, but the Australian government immediately said it would appeal.

Haneef's lawyer Peter Russo said Haneef's legal battle was not over and he remained determined to disprove allegations that could damage his career and ability to study internationally.

"He and his family are gratified by the decision, but prepared for further legal battles," Russo said.

He urged Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews to end a saga that had been "an ordeal" for his client and accept the court's ruling.

Hurricane Dean slams into Mexico

AP, Tulum

Hurricane Dean slammed into the Caribbean coast of Mexico yesterday as a roaring Category 5 hurricane, the most intense Atlantic storm to make landfall in two decades. It lashed ancient Mayan ruins and headed for the modern oil installations of the Yucatan Peninsula.

Dean's path was a stroke of luck for Mexico: It made landfall in a sparsely populated coastline that had already been evacuated, skirting most of the major tourist resorts. It weakened within hours to a Category 3 storm, with maximum sustained winds of 125 mph.

The eye of the storm hit land near Majahual, a port popular with cruise liners, and it was racing across the Yucatan Peninsula toward a Tuesday evening entry into the Bay of Campeche, where the state oil company evacuated the oil rigs that produce most of Mexico's oil.

In the largely Mayan town of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, at one point about 30 miles from the centre of the storm, people stared from their porches at broken tree limbs and electrical cables crisscrossing the streets, some of which were flooded with ankle-deep water.



PHOTO: AFP

Leader of ruling Congress-led UPA Sonia Gandhi (R) is greeted by South African Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister Essop Pahad (L) upon her arrival at the OR Tambo International Airport yesterday in Johannesburg. Sonia Gandhi is on a two-day working visit to South Africa.

Delhi grapples with US nuclear deal gridlock

AFP, New Delhi

A nuclear cooperation accord between India and the United States was billed as historic for bringing New Delhi into the nuclear fold and delivering energy security, but it may now threaten the Indian government.

India's ruling Congress party and its communist allies are at loggerheads over the issue, with neither side willing to back down.

Early elections could be on the cards if the Marxists refuse to give way, as they provide crucial support to the government in parliament.

The four leftist parties have bluntly warned of "serious consequences" if the deal goes ahead.

It is the worst political crisis Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has faced in four years in office. But he too has refused to back down.

"It's a gridlock as neither the

communists nor the Congress wants to blink as of now," said political analyst Pran Chopra.

The communists say the deal, the details of which were disclosed on August 3, sells out India's sovereignty - including the right to carry out nuclear tests -- to the United States.

The main opposition Hindu nationalists are demanding a full, all-party parliamentary committee inquiry into the accord, which offers long-denied Western nuclear technology to power-starved India.

Officials have flailed around for a compromise to cool angry voices, but Congress on Monday came up with nothing better than a committee of diplomats and experts to investigate the so-called 123 agreement.

Opponents have noted that while the US Congress will vote on the accord, India's parliament will have just a debate.

Before that, the left wants to

block New Delhi from opening talks with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the next step towards implementing the deal.

"The situation is where it is and it is now up to them (Congress)," Communist Party of India (CPM) politburo member Sitaram Yechuri told reporters Monday.

"We have told the government to keep the whole thing on hold until our objections are properly evaluated," he said.

Some analysts warned the rift between the coalition allies was too wide to bridge.

"It is now difficult for either party to back down and in one sense they are victims of the positions they have publicly taken," warned Bharat Karnad, an analyst with the Centre for Policy Research, an independent think-tank.

Bus crash kills 29 in Pakistan

AP, Islamabad

A passenger bus plunged off a mountain road into a river bank in northern Pakistan on Monday, killing 29 people and injuring 10 others, the military said.

The bus, which was carrying more than 40 people, crashed in the Pakistani-administered Kashmir region about 25 miles north of Muzaffarabad, the Pakistan army said.

Troops were searching for several passengers on the bus who remained missing, the military said. The cause of the crash was not immediately known.

The bus was heading to Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani Kashmir, from Jura, a town near the Line of Control, which splits Kashmir into its parts controlled by Pakistan and India.

Fatal road accidents are common in Pakistan and many are blamed on widespread disregard for traffic rules and poorly maintained roads. Public transport drivers are also often poorly trained and work long hours.

Syria presses Iraq on US pullout

AP, Damascus

Iraq should set a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops, Syria said Monday at the start of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's first official visit to Damascus.

During talks with al-Maliki, who is looking for help in quelling violence, Syrian Prime Minister Naji Ottri accused US coalition forces of being primarily responsible for the security deterioration in Iraq, and said their withdrawal was key to national reconciliation.

The presence of foreign troops has "brought radical forces and inflamed the cycle of violence," Syria's official news agency SANA quoted Ottri as saying.

Ottri said Syria supports efforts by neighbouring countries to increase security, but Damascus believes that "putting a timetable for troop withdrawal will enhance possibilities of reconciliation among Iraqi people," according to SANA.

Ottri's comments echoed remarks by Iranian officials during al-Maliki's visit to their country this month. The Iranian and Syrian remarks together illustrate the competing pressures on the Iraqi government from the United States on one hand and Washington's two Mideast rivals on the other.

During his visit to Iran, al-Maliki said decisions about an American

pullout were between Iraq and the US.

The Iraqis and Syrians were expected to exchange information about terrorism, with al-Maliki planning to raise the topics of the flow of deadly weapons and fighters across the porous border into Iraq, and the flood of Iraqi refugees in the other direction.

The Iraqis also said they want to raise the issue of wanted members of Saddam Hussein's former regime believed to be in Syria.

As part of Iraq's effort to entice Syria to help, Baghdad pledged to reopen a crude oil pipeline that passes through Syria if the border between the two countries was made safe, officials said.

The United States and Iraq have repeatedly accused Syria of failing to rein in the flow of fighters and arms.

"I think, one, we want the Iraqis to have good relations with their neighbours. That's important. But I also think that the prime minister will be delivering a message to the Syrians, which is please stop allowing foreign fighters, extremists to enter Iraq through your country," US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe said in Washington.



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Foreground) applauds after a speech by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi yesterday. Abe is in India for a three-day visit during which he will meet political leaders in the Indian capital and in Kolkata, family members of Indian freedom fighter Subhash Chandra Bose, who sought the help of Imperial Japan during World War II.