

Negroponte to visit Afghanistan, Pakistan

AFP, Washington

Deputy US Secretary of State John Negroponte is to make a week's visit to Afghanistan and Pakistan from September 10 as part of consultations with the key partners in the "war on terror," the State Department said Wednesday.

In Afghanistan, he is scheduled to hold talks with President Hamid Karzai and other officials and civil society groups on counter-terrorism and reconstruction cooperation, a department statement said.

Negroponte, who is the deputy to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, will hold talks with Pakistan military ruler General Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz and civil society representatives during his visit to Islamabad.

US-led forces kill 40 Afghan insurgents

AP, Kabul

Afghan and US-led coalition troops killed more than 40 suspected Taliban militants in southern Afghanistan, the latest in a wave of strikes that have claimed the lives of hundreds of insurgents, the coalition said yesterday.

A joint Afghan and coalition force was on a combat patrol Wednesday in restive Sha Wali Kot district in southern Kandahar province when came it under attack from insurgent small-arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades, the coalition said in a statement.

Soldiers repelled the attack before calling in coalition aircraft, which "destroyed the positively identified enemy firing positions with precision guided munitions," it said.

The coalition said "more than 40 insurgents" were killed, while Afghan and foreign forces suffered no losses.

Taliban spokesmen were not immediately available for comment and it was not possible to independently confirm the death toll.

Afghan and coalition forces claim to have killed several hundred Taliban insurgents in central and southern Afghanistan in recent weeks. The Taliban have admitted some losses, but say many of the dead are civilians – a charge denied by the coalition.

Militants have also launched scores of attacks, mostly roadside or suicide bombs, that have killed several dozen local and foreign soldiers as well as many civilians.

The Taliban ruled most of Afghanistan from the mid-1990s until 2001, imposing an extreme version of Islam and providing refuge for al-Qaida leaders and thousands of other Muslim militants from around the world. They were ousted by a US-led coalition following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, but are now leading an increasingly bloody campaign against the country's Western-backed government.

Faced with stiff opposition from the government in Pakistan to his return from exile, the former prime minister Nawaz Sharif is making a calculated decision on the choice of the airline so as to reach Islamabad at the right time, "neither too early in the morning nor too late in the night".

Sharif said his party is yet to decide which airline he will take to return to Pakistan on September 10.

"We are looking for an airline which will take us to Islamabad neither too early in the morning nor too late in the night," he said.

"We very much want to travel by our national airline, but perhaps that may not be possible for reasons not under our control," Sharif said.

Sharif wonders which flight to take for return to Pakistan

PTI, Islamabad



PHOTO: AFP

Nepal's King Gyanendra (C) waits for the arrival of the Queen mother at the premises of Norvic hospital in Kathmandu yesterday where Crown Prince Paras was admitted after a heart attack.

Pak lawyers boycott courts to pressure Musharraf to quit

AP, Islamabad

Hundreds of lawyers rallied and boycotted courts across Pakistan yesterday in a renewed campaign to force President Gen Pervez Musharraf to step down as supporters of former premier Nawaz Sharif prepared for his promised return from exile.

Courts in major cities including Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Quetta, Islamabad and Rawalpindi were largely deserted and lawyers hoisted black flags, witnesses said.

In Lahore, about 500 lawyers

wearing black armbands marched on a road chanting slogans against Musharraf. Dozens of lawyers rallied in Quetta chanting "Go Musharraf, Go!"

Lawyers have been at the forefront of a campaign against military rule in Pakistan since Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup, tried to sack the chief justice in March. The move sparked anti-government rallies until the Supreme Court reinstated the judge in July.

"This is the second phase of our protest, and God willing, we will again be successful," said

Mohammed Azhar, a spokesman for the Supreme Court Bar Association. The association is the top representative body of lawyers in Pakistan.

"We are organising peaceful rallies today against the dictatorial rule of Musharraf," he said.

Despite the protests, a Supreme Court bench in Islamabad headed by Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry heard legal challenges to Musharraf's dual role as president and army chief and his eligibility to run for another presidential term.

Myanmar monks free all hostages

AFP, Yangon

Hundreds of Buddhist monks in Myanmar held a group of local and security officials hostage for several hours yesterday, after troops violently broke up an anti-junta protest, residents said.

The showdown in Pakokku, about 500 kilometres (310 miles) north of the commercial capital Yangon, marked the most serious confrontation with the military government since protests erupted nationwide more than two weeks ago.

Tensions have soared in Pakokku, a major centre of Buddhist learning, since at least 300 monks marched through the streets on Wednesday, chanting prayers in a protest against a massive hike in fuel prices.

Troops fired warning shots above the crowd and then beat the monks

with bamboo sticks to break up the protest, according to residents.

Local and security officials had come to the Aletak monastery early Thursday to apologise for the violence, but the monks set four of their cars on fire and took about 20 people hostage, residents said.

Five of the hostages were released after about five hours, and the others were freed 45 minutes later, residents told AFP by telephone.

Outside the gates to the monastery, which is home to about 700 monks, hundreds of people had gathered to applaud their anti-government action, residents said.

Young monks finally decided to end the standoff, opening the gates out of concern for the health of a senior abbot, who needed to receive food and medicine, one resident said.

Nepal prince suffers massive heart attack

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's heir to the embattled throne, Crown Prince Paras, suffered a serious heart attack on Thursday but was out of danger, doctors said.

The 36-year-old known for his wild lifestyle was rushed to hospital in the Nepalese capital earlier in the day after complaining of chest pains.

"The crown prince has had a major heart attack," Bharat Rawat, one of the doctors treating Paras, told reporters.

"He is out of danger now, but we can't say if he will have another heart attack."

The prince -- who has a reputation for being a fast-driving playboy -- would "need to change his diet and lifestyle," he said.

Paras will remain in hospital for around five days, the doctor said at Kathmandu's Norvic hospital where the prince was being treated.

King's name removed from new Nepali coin

AFP, Kathmandu

The name of Nepal's embattled king has been removed from the two-rupee coin, the state bank said yesterday, in the latest move ahead of polls this year that could see the country become a republic.

King Gyanendra's name has been replaced on the coin with an image of Mount Everest, the world's highest peak, which is on Nepal's border with China.

The other side of the coin, which is worth about three cents, shows a farmer ploughing a field.

"This is the first time we have removed the name of the king from coins," Manmohan Kumar Shrestha, the chief currency management official at Nepal's state bank, told AFP.

The national bank had begun distribution Thursday of 100 million coins without the king's name, the official said, adding his image would soon be removed from high-denomination bills.

"The new notes will have the picture

of Mount Everest instead of the king, and an image of a rhododendron, a national flower, as a water mark instead of the king," Shrestha said.

Revered by supporters as a living incarnation of a Hindu god, King Gyanendra was forced to end 14 months of much-criticised authoritarian rule last April after massive protests organised by former rebel Maoists and the country's main political parties.

Since November 2006, the king has been stripped of most of his powers including his role as head of state and army chief. Last month the government also nationalised seven of his royal palaces.

The monarch's fate is set to be decided immediately after crucial elections planned for November when a body elected to rewrite a new constitution will decide whether the king will stay or go.

The fiercely republican Maoists, who have been given seats in parliament as well as ministerial portfolios, have called for the monarchy to be scrapped before the November polls.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian MPs from all the Left parties shout anti-government slogans at the Parliament House in New Delhi yesterday in protest against the current joint naval exercises with the US Navy taking place in the Bay of Bengal.

43 aid workers killed in Lanka: HR group

AFP, Colombo

At least 43 aid workers have been killed in Sri Lanka since early last year amid an escalation of fighting between troops and Tamil separatists, the Asian Human Rights Commission said yesterday.

The AHRC said that another 14 people had gone missing since January 2006 as the government and Tamil Tiger rebels blamed each other for killing civilians, including employees of local and foreign charities.

"This alarming escalation of human rights abuses over the past years clearly shows that existing domestic mechanisms for the protection of civilians and delivering justice have totally failed to deter perpetrators," the AHRC said in a statement.

It released a list of the 43 people it said had been killed, including 17 employees of Action Against Hunger who were shot dead in the embattled northeast of Sri Lanka. The government and the rebels have traded blame for the deaths.

The AHRC accused the government of acting as a "bystander" rather than as the organisation responsible for the protection of its citizens.

"No serious investigation has been initiated so far," it added.

The statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission came days after the International Committee of the Red Cross said that at least 34 people had "disappeared" in Sri Lanka in just the past three weeks.

The Red Cross said it had recorded the 34 disappearances.

The reports came ahead of a UN meeting next week to discuss the island's human rights record in Geneva from September 10-28.

The London-based rights group Amnesty International said last month that hundreds of people disappeared in Sri Lanka in the past year and more than 5,700 such cases from the past three decades were under UN review.

Amnesty said many people taken in for questioning had subsequently disappeared.

Rights groups have said that abuses have increased in tandem with an escalation of fighting between troops and the Tamil Tiger rebels.

More than 5,400 people have been killed in clashes since December 2005 in an ethnic conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.