

50 Taliban killed in US, Afghan operations

al-Qaeda-linked Kabul suicide network busted

AFP, Kabul

At least 50 Taliban rebels have been killed in two days of operations by Afghan and US-led troops across insurgency-hit southern Afghanistan, the defence ministry said yesterday.

In a single operation in the southern province of Kandahar, more than 40 rebels were killed, the ministry said in a statement.

The casualties occurred in Sha Wali Kot, an area of the province badly hit by Taliban unrest in the recent weeks, it added.

Dozens more were killed in similar sweeps elsewhere in Kandahar and neighbouring Helmand province, the statement said without giving an exact figure.

The rebels were killed in a two-day long sweep in the region, it added.

"In Sha Wali Kot alone, 42 enemy fighters were killed and their bodies were recovered," the statement said, adding the operations were backed by coalition air support. It did not give an exact date.

Meanwhile, Afghan security forces backed by international troops launched a new offensive Thursday in Zabul province, next to Kandahar.

Seven insurgents were killed during the operation, called "Black Scorpion," it said. It was not possible to verify the figures independently.

Kandahar, the former stronghold and birthplace of the Taliban, has suffered heavy clashes in recent weeks with around 400 rebels killed

in clashes since mid-August, according to official figures.

Taliban ousted from power some six years ago have been waging a bloody insurgency mainly in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

The insurgency has claimed thousands of lives – mostly those of militants – and has peaked in the past two years, with rebels using more sophisticated tactics such as suicide bombings and roadside explosions.

Earlier Afghan police said Saturday they had busted an al-Qaeda-linked "terrorist network" organising suicide bombings in the capital, Kabul, which has suffered a rash of attacks in the past weeks.

Bombings, shootings kill 10 in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad/ Najaf

At least 10 people were killed in Iraq yesterday, including four in the Shia holy town of Kufa, while security forces launched an assault in the oil region of Kirkuk to flush out Sunni insurgents.

A bomb believed hidden in a bag killed four people, including two children, in a busy marketplace in Kufa, a medic and police official said.

Khalid al-Yassiri from the health department of Najaf, the main city close to Kufa, said four people died in the blast and seven others were wounded. "Two of the dead are children," Yassiri said.

Najaf police chief Abdel Karim Mustafa said the bomb went off in the middle of a Kufa market. "We suspect two people who were wounded to be behind the explosion. They will be interrogated," he said.



Pakistani army soldiers stand alert at a bomb explosion site in Peshawar yesterday. A car bomb exploded in a parking area at a busy market in the northwestern Pakistani city injuring a dozen people.

21 killed in fresh Lanka violence

AFP, Colombo

At least 21 people were killed in fresh violence in Sri Lanka's embattled northern and eastern regions, military officials said yesterday.

Government forces shot dead five suspected Tamil Tiger rebels in the northern peninsula of Jaffna on Saturday, a military official said. He said two more guerrillas were killed in the same area late Friday.

A government trooper was killed and seven others were seriously wounded when a vehicle abandoned by the Tigers exploded in the eastern district of Batticaloa on Saturday, officials said.

They said troops were trying to start the engine of the abandoned vehicle when it exploded on Saturday.

Three soldiers and five Tamil Tiger rebels were killed in a gun battle in the northern Vavuniya region late Friday, the officials said.



Supporters of Iraqi radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr wave national flags as they celebrate the British handover of the Basra presidential palace to the Iraqis on the streets of Basra, 550 km (342 miles) south of Baghdad, on Friday. Iraq formally took charge of the last British military base in the southern port city of Basra on Sept 5.

Suicide bomb kills 28 in Algeria

AFP, Algiers

Algeria was rocked by its second suicide bombing in three days on Saturday as a car bomb ripped through a naval barracks in the northeast of the country, killing at least 28 people.

Around 60 people were injured in the attack in the port town of Dellys 70km east of Algiers, medical sources told AFP. Most of the dead were members of the naval coastguard but civilians were among the injured.

A van normally used to deliver supplies to the barracks smashed through the rear entrance and penetrated 20 metres (yards) inside the base before exploding, according to witnesses.

The vehicle with Algiers number plates was seized beforehand, packed full of explosives and its driver kidnapped, according to

preliminary indications.

A local police official organising the airlifting of the injured by helicopter of the injured said the death toll could rise significantly.

The force of the explosion flattened most of the prefabricated buildings that make up the barracks.

Wood, metal and concrete debris as well as clothing and suitcases were strewn hundreds of metres (yards) around the port as a mass of ambulances with sirens wailing picked up the wounded and helicopters buzzed overhead.

Access to Dellys was blocked off and a security cordon thrown around the port as anti-terrorist police sifted through the rubble.

Former colonial power France immediately condemned the attack, one of the deadliest in the north African country since April and the second in three days.

Bush in Pak polls dilemma

AP, Washington

As Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's grip on power slips, a difficult question looms for the Bush administration: Could the "free and fair" elections the United States is demanding lead to a government that would undermine US efforts to fight terrorists in South Asia?

US officials repeatedly have urged Musharraf, a general who overthrew the elected government in a 1999 coup, to restore democracy. But the emphasis faded after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, when Musharraf became a strong ally in the hunt for extremists and was seen as a source of stability in a volatile, nuclear-armed country and region.

Now, as religious groups, lawyers, judges, journalists and exiled opposition leaders clamour for Musharraf to go, anything other than free elections in coming months might throw Pakistan into deeper turmoil.

Musharraf's many opponents fear he will rig the elections to cling to

power. The United States still praises the general and has contributed billions of dollars in military aid. The No 2 US diplomat, John Negroponte, plans to travel to Pakistan next week for talks with Musharraf.

In a Voice of America broadcast aired in Pakistan on Friday, Defence Secretary Robert Gates expressed US appreciation for the cooperation of Pakistan's armed forces in US anti-terror operations.

Although calls for democracy in Pakistan continue to come from Washington, there is uncertainty that free elections would establish a stable, US-friendly government willing to fight terrorists thought to be regrouping along the border with Afghanistan.

President Bush began his second term saying democracy topped his foreign policy agenda. That commitment has been challenged because of US support for authoritarian rulers considered important to American interests. The White House also shunned Hamas, the Palestinian group that won democratic elections in 2006

but is considered a terrorist group by the United States.

In much of the world, Bush is not seen as a champion of democracy.

A recent report by Congress' independent research service notes that some in Pakistan appear to view US support for Musharraf "as being an impediment to, rather than facilitator of, the process of democratisation."

Robert Hathaway, of the Woodrow Wilson Centre for Scholars, said the United States has "again and again given Musharraf the benefit of the doubt in a way that has encouraged this perception that, notwithstanding our nice words, we really don't care about Pakistani democracy."

As he seeks a new five-year presidential term from lawmakers between Sept 15 and Oct 15, Musharraf faces the most serious threat to his eight-year rule. He has seen his authority wane since a botched attempt in March to fire the country's top judge triggered protests and widespread calls for an end to military rule.

UK announces start of planned Iraq pullout

AP, Baghdad

The British military said yesterday that 500 troops were being withdrawn from Iraq as part of its planned reduction in forces as Iraqis assume control of their own security in southern Iraq.

The announcement came six days after British soldiers pulled back from their last base in Basra and moved to the local airport about 20 kilometers (12 miles) to the north.

The first combat unit, the Kings Royal Hussars Battle Group, which has about 250 members, was told they would return to Britain over the next four weeks, while the other 250 troops would be withdrawn in the coming months as part of ongoing reviews, according to the Ministry of Defence.

"This reduction has been our stated aim for a long period, and there has not been any change in our policy with respect to our support for the Iraqi forces," the British military said in a statement.

The withdrawals will reduce the British force in Iraq to 5,000, most based around Basra, Iraq's second-

largest city, 550 kilometers (340 miles) southeast of Baghdad.

Calm has largely prevailed in the predominantly Shiite city of about 2 million since the British soldiers pulled back to the airport, ceding responsibility to Iraqi security forces.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair paved the way for the move in February, when he said Britain was reducing its force from 7,100 to 5,500. He also said then that Britain could further reduce its force level to below 5,000 once a base at Basra Palace is transferred to Iraqi control in late summer.

Meanwhile, a small Sunni Arab bloc ended its parliamentary boycott Saturday, returning to the legislature as it considers key benchmark legislation demanded by Washington amid increasing pressure to end the political deadlock.

The return of the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue ends the last boycott of parliament, which had contributed to the political paralysis at a critical time as the US pushes for reconciliation.

Apec sets goals on climate change

AP, Sydney

Pacific Rim leaders agreed Saturday to tackle global warming by improving energy use and managing forests better, as thousands of demonstrators rallied to demand the governments do more and act faster.

Some experts and activists dismissed the programme adopted by the presidents of the United States, China, Russia and leaders of other Asia-Pacific economies at an annual summit as too modest to be effective. But the programme's main backers Australia and the US hope to influence upcoming UN negotiations on climate change.

"The world needs to slow, stop and then reverse the growth of global greenhouse gas emissions," the 21 leaders said in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum's Sydney Declaration on Climate Change, Energy Security and Clean Development.

The summit host, Australian Prime Minister John Howard, said

its participants had "charted a new international consensus for the region and the world."

"A great challenge for our region is to balance our energy needs with action to address the threat of climate change posed by greenhouse gas emissions," Howard said outside the Sydney Opera House, where the leaders adopted the declaration on the first of two days of talks.

A dozen blocks away and on the other side of a 10-foot metal fence fortified by concrete barriers and a police cordon about 3,000 protesters held a colourful, mostly peaceful march and rally. Causes included protests against President Bush, the Iraq war and ending poverty.

Kerry Nettle, a senator from the Greens party, demanded that the Pacific Rim leaders take "real action" on global warming, drawing cheers. One protester wore a T-shirt that read "Climate Change is not Cool" while another was dressed a polar bear.



Protesters hold up placards during a rally against US President George W Bush and Apec in Sydney yesterday as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders' summit gets underway in the city. Two policemen were injured and nine protesters arrested as thousands marched in Sydney against visiting US President George W Bush, although police fears of a full-scale riot proved unfounded.

US, Japan press North Korea, Iran over nukes

AFP, Sydney

US President George W Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Saturday joined forces to pressure North Korea and Iran to fully renounce their nuclear ambitions.

Bush and Abe held talks on the sidelines of this year's summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum, which got underway under unprecedented security in Sydney.

"Over the North Korean issue, the leaders agreed on the importance of swift action to realise the complete abandonment of nuclear weapons and their nuclear programme," a Japanese government official said.

Under a six-nation deal reached in February, the communist nation agreed to declare and disable its nuclear programmes in return for vital energy aid and diplomatic concessions.

It followed global condemnation of the North for testing an atomic weapon for the first time last year.

Russia-China relations to remain strong: Putin

AFP, Sydney

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday assured China that the relationship between their countries will remain strong even after he steps down as leader next year.

Putin, whose choice of successor is virtually guaranteed to win the March 2008 election, told his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao: "We have recently come to the greatest dawn in Russian-Chinese relations."

"There is no doubt Russian policy toward China will not change in the coming years," Putin told Hu on the sidelines of a regional summit in Sydney that the Russian leader said was likely their last face-to-face talks before he leaves office.

Putin also reassured Hu that China had Moscow's full support over Taiwan, a breakaway island that Beijing wants back, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao said.

"Putin particularly stressed that the territorial integrity is a basic principle in international law. Russia is firmly in support of China on the Taiwan issue. That will not change," Liu said.

Hu praised Putin at the start of the talks, saying: "Since you have come to power you have worked to strengthen Russian-Chinese relations."

During the talks, Hu stressed that "the Asia-Pacific region is stable overall, but there are some unstable, unsettled factors," according to Liu.

Hu also told Putin he believed that China and Russia should "carry on their strategic cooperation in the security field in order to safeguard regional and global peace and stability."



Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao smile in Sydney yesterday during their meeting at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit.