

15 die in fresh Afghan violence

AFP, Kabul

At least 15 people including a dozen Taliban insurgents and a civilian road worker were killed in a new string of violent attacks across insurgency-hit Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

In the southern province of Zabul, nearly a dozen rebels were killed Tuesday after Afghan security forces called in US-led coalition warplanes to bomb their positions, the US military said.

The rebels had been spotted preparing an ambush on the Afghan troops, Major Timothy Dinneen told AFP.

Two Afghan policemen were killed yesterday when a Taliban-type bomb ripped through their patrol vehicle in the eastern province of Paktia, an Afghan military spokesman told the news agency, pinning the blame on the insurgents.

Also in Paktia, a bomb blast in the restive Zurmat district -- a Taliban hotbed -- killed a road worker on Tuesday, said the spokesman, Mastak Khan.

Taliban fighters have stepped up their attacks in recent months with almost daily attacks targeting Afghan and Western military targets.

Seven Tamil Tigers killed In Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Government forces shot dead at least seven Tamil Tiger rebels in two gun battles in northern Sri Lanka, the defence ministry said yesterday.

Three members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were killed when they tried to break through military defences at Muhamalai on Tuesday, the ministry said.

Another four Tiger rebels were shot dead two hours later in the same area.

There was no immediate reaction from the LTTE which has been locked in combat with security forces since December 2005 following the breakdown of a 2002 truce.

The latest clashes came as the military claimed to have sunk three ships on Tuesday that were smuggling arms to the Tigers.

More than 5,400 people have been killed in the fighting in the past 21 months.

US offers support for crisis-hit Musharraf

Imran Khan barred from entering Karachi

AFP, Islamabad

US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte offered broad support yesterday for Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf as Washington's key ally faces mounting opposition and al-Qaeda-linked violence.

Negroponte refused to condemn military ruler Musharraf's deportation of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif hours after his return from seven years in exile, saying it was an "internal" matter for Pakistan.

He also played down indications that the United States could launch unilateral strikes against militants in Pakistan's tribal areas, saying that US forces would always respect Islamabad's sovereignty.

The fresh show of support comes at a valuable time Musharraf, who according to a poll released on the same day is less

popular among Pakistanis than al-Qaeda supremo Osama bin Laden.

"We welcome Pakistan's leadership as a voice of moderation and reason in the Islamic world. Your nation remains a valuable ally in the war on terror," Negroponte, who arrived yesterday from Kabul, told a news conference.

Negroponte, making his second visit to Pakistan in three months, said he did not discuss the expulsion of Sharif, the man Musharraf ousted in a 1999 coup, with Pakistani officials.

"We view this as an internal Pakistani political and legal matter and it is for the government, people and authorities of Pakistan to decide," he said.

He said the United States "looks forward to democratic elections here quite shortly" but stopped short of specifically urging Musharraf to ensure that they are free and fair.

Negroponte said they had discussed comments by US officials that did not rule out unilateral strikes on Pakistan -- words branded "irresponsible and dangerous" by Pakistan -- but said that Islamabad would be consulted.

"If we intend to carry out whatever activities we do in the tribal areas there will be complete respect for the sovereignty of Pakistan," Negroponte said.

But as Negroponte spoke, Pakistan's political turmoil continued, with cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan banned from entering the southern city of Karachi to lead a protest against Musharraf's allies.

Khan later held a small protest in Islamabad.

"My protest was against the visit of Negroponte. The US should stop interference in Pakistani politics," he told the news agency.



US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte (R) holds talks with Pakistani Foreign Secretary Riaz Mohammad Khan (L) at the foreign ministry in Islamabad yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ex-Philippine president Estrada gets life for corruption

AP, Manila

Former Philippine president and movie star Joseph Estrada was found guilty of massive corruption yesterday and ordered to spend the rest of his life in prison.

Winding up a six-year trial that the 70-year-old had repeatedly insisted was politically motivated, a special anti-corruption court ruled he was guilty of plundering tens of millions of dollars in tax kickbacks and bribes.

It also confiscated 87 million dollars from his bank accounts that had been frozen during the trial. Estrada slumped in his chair as the verdict was read and later vowed to appeal.

"I disagree with the findings and conclusions of the court. These conclusions, however, did not come as a surprise to us," he said, urging his supporters to stay calm.

In a meeting of Estrada's family and lawyers later, his daughter, Jackie

Lopez, openly sobbed while Estrada's son Mayor Joseph Victor Ejercito, had tears streaming down his face.

Estrada said the verdict "appeared to be a political move" that came after pressure from his arch-rival and successor, current President Gloria Arroyo.

"Against the advice of my friends I submitted myself to the judiciary believing that the case would be tried on its merits," he said before being flown by helicopter back to his luxurious compound, where he will remain under house arrest for now.

The case has marked a bitter chapter in Philippine politics that began when the onetime action hero was ousted from power in 2001, a move which led to violent street protests.

Estrada has accused the business elite, Arroyo and the powerful Roman Catholic church of conspiring against him because of his populist platform.

Bush to announce troop cut in Iraq today

30,000 soldiers to be withdrawn by July next

AFP, Baghdad

US President George W Bush is to announce today (Thursday) a cut of 30,000 soldiers from Iraq by next July and a top Iraqi official said another 30,000 may have gone by the end of 2008.

Bush is expected to announce the cut in a televised address to the nation on the unpopular Iraq war, which follows two days of Congress testimony by the top US military commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus.

Bush will use the speech to endorse Petraeus' proposal to withdraw some 30,000 soldiers by July 2008, reducing the number of troops to the 130,000 before a so-called "surge" operation was launched in a bid to boost security.

In Baghdad, the Iraqi government said yesterday it expects the

US troop level to fall to 100,000 by the end of 2008 and that the number could drop to less than 90,000 the following year.

"A gradual withdrawal will be in coordination with readiness of Iraqi security forces," Iraq's National Security Adviser Muwaffaq al-Rubaie told reporters, stressing that a speedy pullout would harm the security situation.

"As Iraqi forces become ready, the need to use multinational forces decreases," he said. "Our real problem is that people (in America) do not understand how difficult and complicated the problem in Iraq is. You can't solve these problems in three years. We need strategic patience."

The US gradual withdrawal plan did little to appease the powerful Shiite movement led by fiery anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. His movement

demanding a complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq.

"Our basic aim is not a timetable but full withdrawal... we will keep demanding that until the last soldier leaves Iraq," said Abdul-Mahdi al-Mutayri, a member of the politburo of Sadr's office.

Iran, Iraq's neighbor and a US foe, also dismissed Washington's strategy.

"This report will not save the United States from the Iraqi quagmire," said foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini, according to the official IRNA news agency.

Bush is to speak for around 15 minutes Thursday at 9:00 pm (Friday 0100 GMT). He has repeatedly insisted that his decisions about Iraq are made on the recommendations of military leaders on the ground.



PHOTO: AFP

A Lankan family enjoy a late walk on the beach in Colombo yesterday, minutes before the government issued a tsunami alert asking people living in coastal areas to leave for safe places after a massive earthquake took place off the west coast of Indonesia's Sumatra island.

UN nuclear watchdog reviewing Iran file

AFP, Vienna

The UN nuclear watchdog was yesterday reviewing new measures for inspections in Iran, with Western nations warning that Tehran must still halt activities that could be used to make atom bombs.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) 35-nation board of governors was discussing a report from agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei which says Iran has not halted uranium enrichment, the process which makes nuclear reactor fuel but also atom bomb material.

The report also includes a timetable which the IAEA agreed in August with Iran for Tehran to answer questions about its nuclear work that remain unresolved in an agency investigation which began in February 2003.

Iran maintains that its nuclear program is a peaceful drive to generate electricity but the United States charges that Tehran is using it to hide work on developing atomic weapons.

ElBaradei was back in the boardroom on Wednesday morning after walking out on Tuesday afternoon in protest over an EU speech which did not fully support his deal for new inspections, diplomats told AFP.

"He walked out because the EU did not support the Secretariat," said a diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity about the closed-door session.

But a senior European diplomat said the European Union supported ElBaradei and had only reiterated the IAEA chief's view that the timetable needed "Iran's full and active cooperation."



PHOTO: AFP

Pope Benedict XVI arrives in St. Peter's Square to celebrate his weekly general audience at the Vatican yesterday.

Nepal prince discharged from hospital

AFP, Kathmandu

The heir to Nepal's threatened throne was discharged from hospital yesterday nearly a week after suffering a heart attack, doctors said.

Crown Prince Paras, 36, is an unpopular figure and had gained notoriety for incidents including nightclub brawls and speeding. Last week doctors said the prince needed to change his lifestyle.

But a group of around two dozen royal supporters turned up at the hospital to chant "long live Prince Paras" as he was discharged.

Sporting a recently grown beard and new ponytail, Paras left hospital looking relaxed, and waved at the well-wishers as he got into a large black Mercedes before being taken home.

"I am fine and I will be taking at least three weeks' rest," the prince told a local television station just before leaving Norvic Hospital in Kathmandu.

"He has recovered well but he needs another four weeks' rest," Shyam Bahadur Pandey, one of the doctors who treated the prince, told reporters.

Paras was rushed to hospital last Thursday after suffering chest pains, and doctors said he had suffered a "major" heart attack.

The crown prince was vaulted to his position as next in line to the throne in 2001 in tragic and bizarre circumstances.