

12 dead in latest Afghan unrest

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's insurgency claimed 12 more lives, including those of two brothers accused by the Taliban of being spies, while a suicide blast near a Nato convoy Monday wounded two civilians, officials said.

The suicide attacker blew himself up near a military convoy of the Nato-led force that was moving through the southern town of Lashkar Gah, police said.

"It did not cause any harm to the Nato troops but two men nearby were badly wounded," Helmand province police chief Mohammad Hussein Andival told AFP.

He blamed insurgents from the Taliban movement, which was removed from government six years ago by a US-led invasion in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The insurgents vowed to step up their use of suicide attacks during the month of Ramadan, which ends next week, and there has been a wave of blasts in recent weeks.

50 Pak troops missing after clashes

Tribal area battle toll rises to 80

AFP, Miranshah

Around 50 Pakistani soldiers are missing after gunbattles with Islamic militants in a troubled tribal area that have already claimed 80 lives since the weekend, the army said yesterday.

The soldiers have been out of radio contact since the morning in rugged North Waziristan, a region bordering Afghanistan where the United States says Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network and the Taliban are regrouping.

News of the missing soldiers comes as a fresh blow to the army, with militants already holding more than 200 Pakistani soldiers in another part of the insurgency-plagued ethnic Pashtun tribal belt.

Violence has spiked in the troubled region since Pakistani security forces besieged and then raided the al-Qaeda-linked Red Mosque in

Islamabad in July -- an operation that Osama bin Laden has urged militants to avenge.

"We have reports of around 50 troops missing. They are out of communications and their whereabouts have not been found," chief military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad told AFP.

The soldiers went missing as they were moving from place to place following fresh clashes near Mir Ali, the second biggest town in North Waziristan, Arshad said.

The military said earlier that the death toll from fierce clashes on Sunday in the same region had risen to 60 militants and 20 soldiers.

Troops backed by gunship helicopters launched an assault against militant bases and hideouts in retaliation for attacks on military convoys overnight on Friday, sparking hours of intense battles.

"Sixty militants have been killed by security forces in North Waziristan Agency since Sunday morning," an army statement said Monday. "Twenty security forces persons have also embraced Shahadat (martyrdom) in the ensuing clashes."

Local residents said four civilians also died, including three women, although the military could not confirm this.

President Pervez Musharraf has been under mounting pressure to tackle militants who fled over the Afghan border after the US-led invasion to topple the Taliban regime in late 2001.

Musharraf, a key US ally at the centre of international efforts to combat Islamic extremism, won a landslide victory in Saturday's presidential election and pledged to continue the fight against terrorism "100 percent."

Musharraf's eventual army successor takes up post

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's former spymaster took over as the vice chief of army staff yesterday, setting up to succeed President Pervez Musharraf as leader of the army in coming weeks, officials said.

General Ashfaq Kiyani, the head of the Inter-Services Intelligence or ISI, received a guard of honour at army headquarters in Rawalpindi as he arrived to take up the post, a military statement said.

"A ceremony was held at the general headquarters to formally welcome the newly appointed vice chief of army staff on assuming charge of the new appointment," it said.

"A smartly turned out contingent of the Pakistan army presented a guard of honour to the vice chief of army staff."

After reviewing the parade Kiyani was officially introduced to principal staff officers, the statement said.



Pakistani soldiers stand beside the wreckage of a helicopter escorting President Pervez Musharraf, which crash landed in Garhi Dopatta, some 20km from Muzaffarabad yesterday. A helicopter escorting President Pervez Musharraf to an earthquake memorial crashed in Pakistani Kashmir, killing four troops and wounding his spokesman, officials said.



Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (R) delivers a speech yesterday during a ceremony in remembrance of the 73,000 people killed in the October 8, 2005 quake in Muzaffarabad.

Maoists propose referendum on Nepali monarchy

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists yesterday proposed a referendum on the monarchy as a way out of a deadlock in the country's peace process.

The call came days after crucial polls on the Himalayan nation's political future were cancelled because of a deepening rift between the former rebels and mainstream parties over how the fate of the king should be decided.

"Holding a referendum on the monarchy came up as an option to end the political deadlock," senior Maoist ideologue CP Gajurel told AFP after the ultra-leftists held high-level meetings over the weekend.

"We don't really know what other options there are," he added.

When they signed up for peace last November and ended their decade-long insurgency, the ultra-republican Maoists agreed for the

question of the increasingly unpopular royals to be decided by an elected constituent assembly.

But the Maoists stormed out the government three weeks ago, demanding the immediate abolition of the monarchy and arguing that the polls -- which were scheduled for November 22 -- were stacked against them because of the electoral system.

After first agreeing to polls with a mixed first-past-the-post and proportional representation system, the ex-rebels are now demanding full proportional voting.

They have also warned that die-hard supporters of King Gyanendra in the army are plotting a coup.

The suggestion of a referendum is one of several proposals aimed at resolving the troubles in the peace process. The Maoists have also been lobbying for a vote on abolishing the monarchy in the interim parliament.

'War on terror' has been a 'disaster'

Says British think tank

AFP, London

The US-led "war on terror" has been a "disaster" and Washington and its allies must change their policy in Iraq and Afghanistan to defeat al-Qaeda, an independent global security think tank said yesterday.

The Oxford Research Group (ORG) said in a report that Western strategy since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States had failed to extinguish the threat from Islamist extremism and even fuelled it.

"Every aspect of the war on terror has been counterproductive in Iraq and Afghanistan, from the loss of civilian life through mass detentions without trial. In short, it has been a disaster," report author Paul Rogers said.

"Western countries simply have

to face up to the dangerous mistakes of the past six years and recognise the need for new policies."

Rogers, professor of peace studies at the University of Bradford, northern England, also warned that any military action against Iran over the Islamic republic's disputed nuclear programme would further aggravate the situation.

"Going to war with Iran will make matters far worse, playing directly into the hands of extreme elements and adding greatly to the violence across the region," he added.

"Whatever the problems with Iran, war should be avoided at all costs -- the mistakes already made will be completely overshadowed by the consequences of a war with Iran."

Chief among the report's criticisms is that the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was a "grievous mistake", which had created a

combat training zone for extremist elements linked to or inspired by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda.

The report, "Towards Sustainable Security: Alternative Approaches to the War on Terror", said the situation was comparable to the rise of the Mujahedin that rose against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

On Afghanistan, the ORG said ousting the hardline Taliban from power in late 2001 had been of "direct value" to al-Qaeda and militia sympathetic to its violent Islamist ideology were now reinvigorated, it added.

In addition, mass detentions of suspected extremists, torture, prisoner abuse and the "extraordinary rendition" of suspects for questioning in third countries outside US legal jurisdiction was a useful propaganda weapon.

Political tensions mount in India over US nuclear deal

AFP, New Delhi

Tensions in India over a civil nuclear pact with Washington that threatens the survival of the country's ruling coalition worsened yesterday ahead of a vote by the UN's atomic energy chief.

The head of the ruling Congress party, Sonia Gandhi, said opponents of the deal were "enemies of progress," prompting a furious response from left-wing legislative allies who could bring down the government.

The nuclear deal, if implemented, would allow energy-hungry India to buy civilian nuclear technology while possessing nuclear weapons, despite not having signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

But India's Communists say it would pull traditionally non-aligned India uncomfortably close to the United States and compromise New Delhi's military programme.

In a public meeting on Sunday, Gandhi said opponents of the pact "are not only the enemies of Congress but they are also enemies of progress and development."

"We have to give them a strong

and befitting reply," she said.

The four-party left bloc, which props up Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government in parliament, responded Monday with a statement repeating its view that Congress was going "against the interests of India."

"Those who advocate the deal should know that India is capable of developing nuclear energy primarily on a self-reliant basis," the statement said.

A 15-member panel set up to iron out differences between the two sides has had little success despite a string of meetings, and in recent days the Indian press has been brimming with speculation over the possibility of snap polls.

Analyst Yashwant Deshmukh said it now looked like "the beginning of the end" of the Congress Left alliance.

"It is a question of when rather than if" the coalition will split, he said.

"Some Congress strategists believe that the party will be able to win more seats in parliament if there are elections now. And Gandhi's comments seem to reflect this belief."

S Korea sure of early nuclear settlement

AP, Seoul

The South Korean president said Monday the global standoff over North Korea's nuclear weapons programmes will soon be resolved, as US experts prepared to travel to Pyongyang to form a plan for disabling the country's reactors.

"I'm confident the North Korean nuclear issue will rapidly arrive at a complete resolution," South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun said, citing a detailed multilateral agreement aimed at the North's denuclearisation that was approved by the leaders of the two Koreas.

Roh's speech was read in the National Assembly by Prime Minister Han Duck-soo.

The president travelled to Pyongyang last week for talks with Kim Jong Il for the first inter-Korean summit in seven years.

The leaders signed an accord pledging to make "joint efforts to ensure the smooth implementation" of agreements made at a new round of six-nation talks involving the two Koreas, the US, China, Russia and Japan.

Israel minister draws fire over Jerusalem division call

AFP, Jerusalem

A close ally of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert sparked controversy yesterday after saying that Israel should share sovereignty of Jerusalem with the Palestinians as part of a peace deal.

"It is in Israel's interest to tackle the issue of Jerusalem in the negotiations," deputy prime minister Haim Ramon said, reiterating his stance over the holy city, which Israel calls its "eternal, indivisible capital."

"If we reach a deal with the Palestinians, the Arab world and the international community according to which the Jewish neighbourhoods of Jerusalem will be recognised as the capital of Israel and the Arab neighbourhoods as part of the Arab capital, will that be a bad deal?"

Ramon also urged Israel not to miss the opportunity presented by a US-sponsored Middle East conference expected to take place in Annapolis, Maryland in November to try to advance the dormant

peace talks.

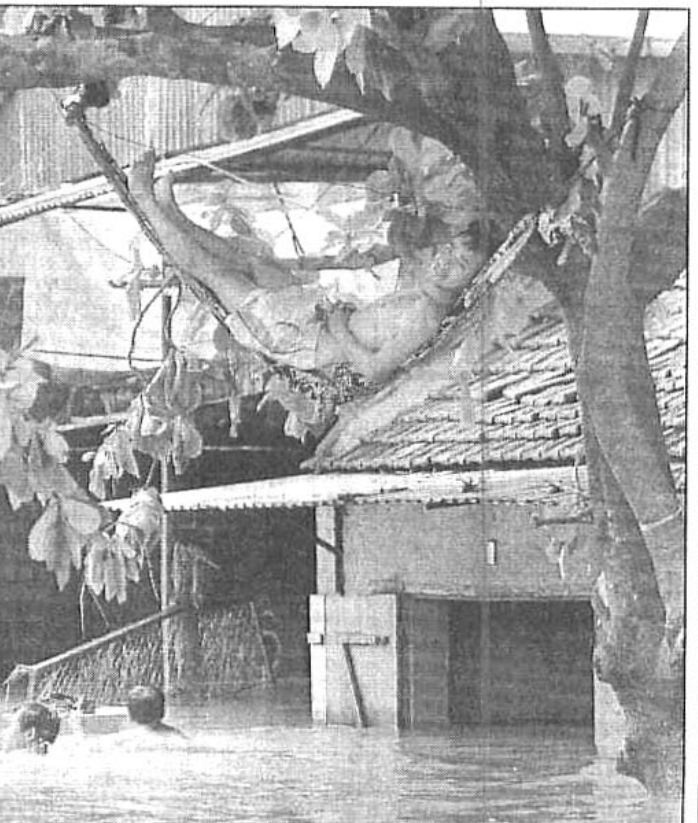
Israel captured Arab east Jerusalem, including the Old City with its sites holy to Christianity, Islam and Judaism -- during the 1967 Six Day war and later annexed it.

In 1980, the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, passed a law proclaiming it the "reunified and eternal capital of Israel," a claim not recognised by the international community.

Ramon's comments as Israeli and Palestinian officials met for the first time to draw a joint statement outlining understandings ahead of the renewal of bilateral talks which are planned following the international meeting.

But senior members of Olmert's coalition government were swift to criticise Ramon for breaking one of Israel's strongest taboos.

"Of course, Jerusalem is not on the negotiations agenda," Trade and Industry Minister and chairman of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party Eli Yishai told AFP.



A man rests on a hammock over a flooded street in Thach Thanh district, central province of Thanh Hoa yesterday. At least 58 people have died in Vietnam since a typhoon slammed into the country and brought the worst floods in decades to northern and central areas, rescue officials said.

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