

Brown in Afghanistan as troops retake town

AFP, Kabul

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown made a surprise visit to Afghanistan Monday as Afghan troops backed by Nato forces retook the southern town of Musa Qala, captured by Taliban rebels 10 months ago.

Brown arrived in Kabul after meeting British soldiers in the southern province of Helmand where thousands of Afghan and British Nato troops have since Friday been advancing on Musa Qala.

Nato's International Security Assistance Force told AFP the Afghan troops had entered the town at around 1000 GMT. A Taliban spokesman confirmed the rebel fighters had retreated.

"The ANA (Afghan National Army) have entered the district centre. They are in the centre of the town," Isaf spokesman Major Charles Anthony said in Kabul. He was not aware of ongoing fighting.

The Afghan defence ministry

issued a statement saying Afghan troops backed by Isaf had started clean-up operations in Musa Qala district, of which the town is the centre.

The Taliban's chief spokesman, Yousuf Ahmadi, told AFP by telephone that Taliban fighters holed up in the town had "retreated" to avoid civilian casualties in any further fighting.

The Afghan defence ministry said earlier Monday that resistance had "crashed" in Musa Qala and the soldiers were one kilometre (half a mile) from the town.

Brown, on his first trip to Afghanistan as prime minister, was due to hold talks with President Hamid Karzai later Monday, Western officials said.

Earlier he met British troops at their base at Camp Bastion in Helmand.

In comments shown on BBC television, he praised their bravery and commitment in fighting Taliban militia in difficult circumstances.

"I thank every one of you for what you have done in what is the frontline against the Taliban because this is one of the most challenging of environments."

"It is one of the most difficult of tasks. It is the most testing of times. It is one of the most important of missions," he said.

"To win here and to defeat the Taliban and to make sure that we can give strength to the new democracy in Afghanistan is important in defeating terrorism all around the world," he said.

Brown, whose trip was unannounced for security reasons, arrived from Iraq where he said Britain would hand over Basra province to Iraqi control within two weeks.

He has already said the number of British troops in Iraq would be cut by more than half to 2,500 by early next year.

In Afghanistan however Britain is due to boost its more than 6,000 troops to about 7,700 by the end of the year.

UN says patience running out on Myanmar

AP, Bangkok

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warned Myanmar the international community was running out of patience with its authoritarian regime, saying Monday the junta must embrace democracy and stop inflicting suffering on its own people.

"I know the international community is very much impatient, and our patience is running out," Ban told a news conference in Bangkok, Thailand.

"The people of Myanmar have suffered from isolation for such a long time and it's high time now that the Myanmar authorities and the people... enjoy democracy and freedom."

A UN human rights envoy said Friday that Myanmar's crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in September killed at least 31 people, twice the toll acknowledged by the junta. The envoy, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, also said that 650 people remained in custody from the crackdown and another 74 people were missing.

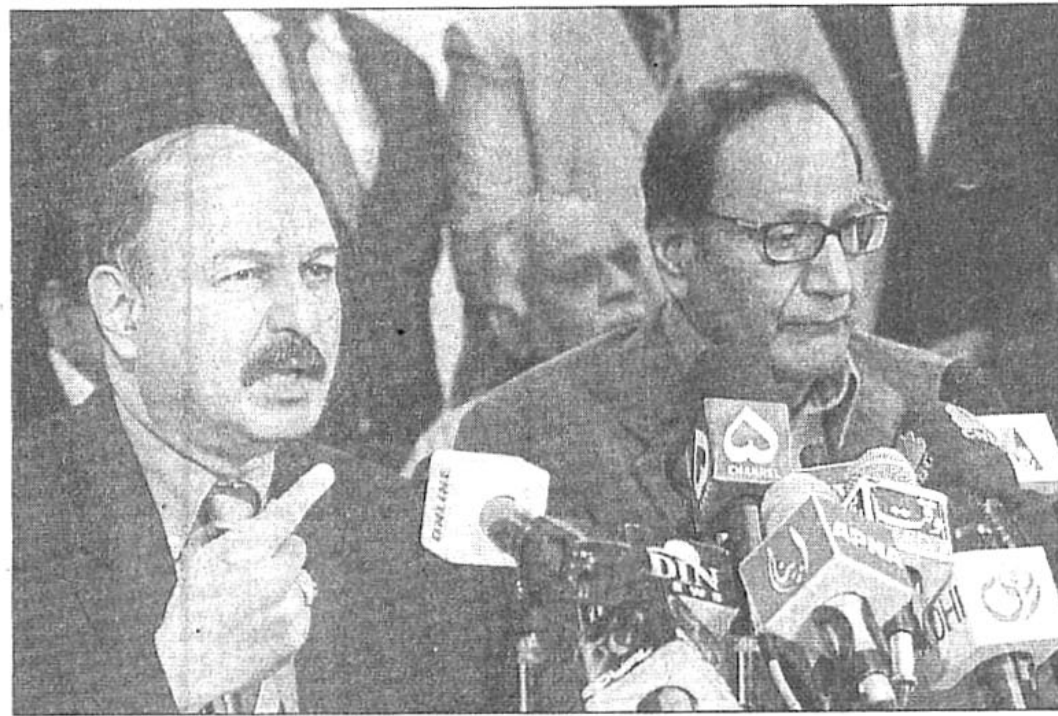


PHOTO: AFP

Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain (R) president of the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) looks on as his party's secretary general, Mushahid Hussain (L) speaks during a press conference in Islamabad yesterday. The party backing Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf unveiled its election manifesto saying it focused on human rights, political reconciliation and tackling extremism.

'Sharif's polls participation to give Musharraf much needed legitimacy'

AFP, Islamabad

Former Pakistani premier Nawaz Sharif's decision to contest upcoming elections is good for democracy, analysts say -- but may ironically have strengthened his arch-foe, President Pervez Musharraf.

Sharif's opposition party announced on Sunday that it would take part in the January 8 polls, saying that it did not want to leave an allegedly rigged field free for groups that back key US ally Musharraf.

Sharif, who is personally banned from standing due to criminal convictions, said on Monday that without other political leaders including Benazir Bhutto onside, a partial boycott would be "disastrous for the opposition."

But as the man who toppled Sharif in 1999 and who only gave up his role as army chief last month, Musharraf craves the legitimacy that internationally accepted, non-boycotted elections would bring, analysts say.

Pro-Musharraf parties backed

Sharif's participation, saying it would enhance the credibility of the vote amid international concerns about the fairness of elections and an ongoing state of emergency.

"In a way it strengthens the credibility of elections -- and Musharraf needs credible elections," Hasan Askari, a former professor of political science at Lahore's Punjab University, told AFP.

"His options are not as big as in the past, so he needs to be visualised as a civilised ruler and had major opposition parties boycotted elections, it would have seriously damaged his legitimacy," he said.

Musharraf could still be in trouble however if Sharif's and Benazir Bhutto's parties do well at the polls, Askari said.

The newly civilian president needs a two-thirds majority in parliament to indemnify the November 3 state of emergency and suspension of the constitution -- without which he risks impeachment.

"His ability to function would be greatly undermined if his oppo-

nents come with a reasonable majority in the parliament because he is no more the army chief," he said.

"It would be difficult for him to get parliamentary endorsements for his actions since November 3 emergency rule and then there will be another crisis," he added.

Former general-turned political analyst Talat Masood agreed that Sharif's move to join the fray would legitimise the elections -- but in a way that would help democracy in the volatile nuclear-armed nation.

"In the long term it will benefit democracy and weaken the autocratic forces," Masood said.

"It will further energise the election process and put life into a campaign which has so far been dull."

Masood said Sharif had taken a "prudent decision" and that his absence would have marginalised him.

"There will be common interest to make the election process as fair as possible. It will increase pressure on the government to hold, free and fair elections," he added.

Putin backs Medvedev as presidential candidate

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday backed First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev as presidential candidate to replace him after he leaves office next year, Russian media reported.

"I fully support this candidacy," Putin was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency after four parties, headed by the ruling United Russia, named Medvedev.

"As far as the candidacy of (Medvedev) is concerned, I have known him for more than 17 years, I have worked with him closely all these years, and I completely and fully support this candidacy," Putin said in video footage shown on state television. Putin is to step down after the March 2 presidential elections after serving two consecutive terms. Whichever candidate Putin endorses is widely expected to be almost assured of replacing him in the Kremlin.

Medvedev, 42, is a Kremlin insider seen as a staunch Putin loyalist.

A lawyer by training, Medvedev owes his rise within Russia's power elite to Putin, who hired him in the early 1990s to work on his staff at the Saint Petersburg local government.

UN agencies call for restoring Gaza fuel supplies

AFP, Jerusalem

UN agencies appealed yesterday for full energy supplies to be restored to the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, saying they were deeply concerned over the state of the territory's health system.

"The World Health Organisation and UNRWA (the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees) express their deep concern on the combined impact of the lack of electricity supply and fuel shortage on the delivery of health services," the two agencies said in a statement.

"WHO and UNRWA are appealing to all parties involved to ensure that in the future all health facilities in Gaza are supplied with the appropriate amount of electricity and fuel to provide fully functional services," they said ahead of a symposium on Gaza health services to be held in Jerusalem.

Kosovo seeks statehood talks as deadline ends

AFP, Pristina

Kosovo's leaders said yesterday they would embark on immediate talks on independence from Serbia and EU nations backed their cause as a UN deadline ended for a negotiated settlement.

"From today, Kosovo is starting intense consultations with its international partners with the aim of coordinating steps for declaring independence, and the official demands for recognising independence," said Skender Hyseni of the Kosovo Albanian negotiating team.

Several thousand Kosovo Albanian youths demonstrated in the provincial capital Pristina to press their leaders to follow through with promises for statehood -- which the ethnic Albanian majority has been pressing for since a brutal Serbian crackdown in 1999.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned of a "chain reaction" from any independence move but European Union foreign ministers said they were close to reaching a united stance on recognising an independent Kosovo.

5 die in US church, mission attacks

AP, Colorado Springs

A gunman shot four staff members at a missionary training centre near Denver early Sunday, killing two, after being told he couldn't spend the night. About 12 hours later and 65 miles away in Colorado Springs, a gunman fatally shot a parishioner at a megachurch and wounded four other people before a guard killed him, police said.

One of the hospitalized victims from the second attack died Sunday at about 10:10 p.m., said Amy Sufak, a spokeswoman for Penrose Community Hospital in Colorado Springs.

The police chief in Arvada, a suburb about 15 miles west of Denver where the mission workers were shot, said the shootings may be related to those in Colorado Springs but declined to elaborate. No one had been captured in the Arvada shootings, authorities said.

Early Monday, authorities were searching a home in suburban Englewood, about 15 miles south of Denver, that they said could be related to the Colorado Springs shooting case. Results of that search were not immediately known.

Myanmar stepping up attacks on insurgents Says rebel group

AFP, Bangkok

Military-ruled Myanmar has stepped up its offensive against ethnic Karen rebels following a crackdown on pro-democracy protests in September, one of the main insurgent groups said yesterday.

The Karen National Union (KNU) said that Myanmar's military began the offensive about one year ago, but that the attacks have intensified since October.

The KNU accused the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) of waging a "genocidal war" against ethnic Karen villagers, saying thousands of people have had to flee their homes to escape the fighting.

"In the offensives, the SPDC army troops ... perpetrate the heinous crimes of arresting and killing innocent Karen civilians, plunder, destruction, forced relocation, forced labour and extortion of money," the KNU said in a statement.

"The current military campaign is in fact a genocidal war and it is diametrically opposed to the process of resolving the political problems by political means," it said.

The KNU is the largest rebel group fighting Myanmar's armed forces and one of the few remaining ethnic insurgent groups yet to sign a peace deal with the junta.

Myanmar, under military rule since 1962, has signed ceasefires with 17 other ethnic armed groups.

The latest military onslaught began after soldiers and police violently suppressed pro-democracy protests in the main city of Yangon and other towns across the country.

The protests, led by Buddhist monks, were the biggest threat to military rule in nearly 20 years.

A UN report said Friday that at least 31 were killed and 74 missing after the crackdown, with more than 600 dissidents still in detention.

Nepal cabinet member, MPs resign over ethnic unrest

AFP, Kathmandu

A minister and three members of Nepal's parliament have resigned over the government's failure to tackle ethnic and communal violence in the south of the country, officials said Monday.

Since the start of the year, around 200 people have been killed in unrest in the southern plains region known as the Terai.

At least a dozen armed groups have sprung up in the last 12 months claiming to be fighting for increased autonomy for the region, home to around half on Nepal's 27 million people.

Hridayesh Tripathi, a member of Nepal's interim parliament, told AFP that the politicians resigned because of "the state's indifferent attitude to

the problems of the Mahadhesi community in the Terai region."

Mahadhesi activists say that their region has long been neglected by Kathmandu and that hill-origin, high caste groups dominate Nepali politics.

A peace deal between Nepal's former rebel Maoists and mainstream political parties ended a bloody decade of civil war late last year, but the ongoing unrest in the southern region has cast a shadow over the landmark pact.

Along with Tripathi, Nepal's Minister for Science and Technology Mahanta Thakur has quit as well as two other members of Nepal's interim parliament.

The four politicians belong to four different political parties including the country's largest, the Nepali Congress party.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepal's Minister for Science and Technology and Senior Nepali Congress Leader Mahanta Thakur (Foreground-2-R) Hridayesh Tripathi of the Nepal Sadbhawana Party-Ananda Devi (NSP-A) (2-L), Mahendra Yadav of the Communist Party of Nepal - Marxist and Leninist (CPN-UML) (Foreground-R), Ram Chandra Rai of the Rastriya Prajantanka Party (L) and other leaders look on during press conference after resigning from the ministerial post and party leadership in Kathmandu yesterday.

Rights group urges foreign intervention 13 killed in fresh Lankan violence

AFP, Colombo

A human rights group yesterday urged immediate international action in Sri Lanka to prevent abductions and killings of civilians by government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels.

In a statement marking international human rights day, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) said Sri Lanka had the highest frequency of cases of disappearances in the world reported to the United Nations.

"The present situation requires immediate scrutiny and action on the part of the UN and the international community," the AHRC said in a statement. It added that there were virtually no investigations into abuses.

The London-based Amnesty International and New York-based Human Rights Watch have repeated calls for a UN rights monitoring mission in Sri Lanka, where fighting between troops and Tamil rebels has surged since December 2005.

Since September, more than 20,000 people have been displaced by the fighting, the rights groups said in an open letter ahead of a UN meeting on human rights in Geneva next week.

Sri Lanka's government has refused to allow international monitoring of its human rights record.

But the AHRC said "the international community must examine whether it is justifiable to remain inactive purely on the grounds of the government's unwillingness to allow intervention to stop the high levels of violence in the country."

Meanwhile, at least 13 people have died in fresh violence in northern Sri Lanka including 11 Tamil Tiger rebels, the government claimed Monday.

Eleven Tiger rebels were killed in separate clashes with troops in the Mannar and Vavuniya districts in the 24 hours to Monday morning, the defence ministry said, adding that a government soldier was also killed.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian rescue workers are seen at the wreckage of the derailed express train, the Brahmaputra Mail, which was running from Guwahati to New Delhi, in the Nijbari railway station area, some 39 km from Siliguri yesterday. Fifteen compartments of the express train derailed in a northern district of West Bengal killing at least one passenger and injuring 49 on Sunday night.

New US-Iran talks on Iraq set for Dec 18

AFP, Baghdad

US and Iranian officials will hold another round of talks on Iraq's security at experts level on December 18, Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said yesterday.

"This will be a technical meeting... not at ambassadors' level... but at experts level. There are positive signals from Tehran and Washington," Zebari told a news conference.

Asked if the meeting would constitute a fourth round of talks between the three parties, he replied: "Yes," adding this would not be the last round of talks between the two arch foes over Iraq.

"This is a technical committee made up of security experts, military, diplomats together. This committee is focused on security issues, so everybody agreed to resume talks on that basis," he said.

"It doesn't mean that there wouldn't be in the future further meetings at a different level, by the ambassadors or even high level."

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki announced on November 20 that Iran had agreed to a new round of talks with the United States on improving security in Iraq but did not give any date.

Iran and the United States have already held three rounds of talks over Iraq this year despite mounting tensions. The two foes have had no formal diplomatic relations since 1980.

Zebari said Baghdad's neighbours are showing better cooperation in curbing the bloodshed in the country.

"We feel that there has been better regional cooperation with the Iraqi government in terms of flow of foreign fighters, of terrorists, of assistance and interven-

tions -- this is due to the steps that the government has taken to engage our neighbours constructively," Zebari said.

"For that purpose, I will travel today to Damascus, to Syria, in response to an invitation, just to emphasise that point."

Zebari said Tehran was also showing an increased level of "assistance" in helping Baghdad to quell the violence.

"As for the cooperation of Iran, we indeed have many indications to see that it has provided assistance. Of course, because of the overall situation, we always desire for more."

"But we feel there is a greater recognition and realisation that instability in Iraq will affect their interests sooner (rather) than later."

US commanders have also said in recent weeks that Iran was helping in reducing the violence in Iraq.