

Bombs kill four in Afghanistan

AFP, Kandahar

Two bombs, one of them hidden under a dead body, exploded near the southern Afghan city of Kandahar and killed four people, police said yesterday.

Police blamed Taliban fighters for the blasts, which occurred Sunday. The bomb under the body killed a policeman and a villager in the Panjwayi district west of Kandahar city, senior police officer Mohammad Omar said.

"When a police officer along with a civilian villager came to remove the body, it exploded and killed both," he said. "It was the work of the Taliban."

He could not say whose corpse was used to hide the bomb but villagers said it could have been that of a man killed by the Taliban in recent days for alleged spying.

The rebels have killed dozens of people, including children, on similar charges.

Sunni fighters need political role

AP, Baghdad

The rise of armed Sunni groups who now battle al-Qaeda in Iraq instead of fighting US troops is widely seen as a major reason for a drop in violence across the country.

But bringing these fighters into the fold of Iraq's security forces and sparking a political reconciliation that will allow more Sunnis to participate in the governing process is something the Shia-dominated government is not adequately addressing, analysts say.

Iraqi officials report the number of fighters in the so-called "awakening" councils as about 70,000 and rapidly growing. They expect the number of Sunni fighters in Baghdad alone to grow to 45,000 next year, a fourfold increase from present figures.

By comparison, the Shia dominated army and police make up the majority of the 440,000 Iraqi security forces.

Shia government officials have in recent weeks cautiously praised the fighters for helping reduce violence. But laced into the comments were warnings that represent Shias' biggest fear: that these groups will become an uncontrollable force and eventually use their guns to escalate a sectarian war that has largely divided Iraq into blocs along religious lines.

Snow storm pounds US Midwest: 11 die

AFP, Washington

A heavy snow storm pelted the American Midwest, causing deadly road accidents, power outages and grounded flights for Christmas holiday travellers, US media reported on Monday.

The storm left at least 11 dead in car crashes across the central United States over the weekend, local papers said, with icy roads and poor visibility causing hundreds of accidents.

Snow, ice, fog and powerful winds created havoc for those trying to head home for the Christmas holiday on treacherous highways or via airports plagued by delays and cancelled flights, local newspapers said.

The National Weather Service on Sunday maintained winter storm warnings for parts of the Great Lakes region with snow and powerful gusts in northern Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan.

In parts of Michigan, four to eight inches (10 to 17 centimeters) of snow was expected to fall by Christmas morning on Tuesday, the forecasters said.

Pakistan diverting anti-terror US aid to counter India: NYT

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New York

Pakistan has diverted much of the over \$5 billion US anti-terror aid to finance weapon systems designed to counter India, not al-Qaeda or the Taliban, officials of the Bush administration and military have said.

Acknowledging that there were too few controls over the money given to Pakistan over the past six years since 9/11, some US officials have called for completely revamping the strategy to improve the Pakistani military. The New York Times (NYT) reported in a lead story on Monday.

The Pentagon last week com-

pleted a review and produced a classified plan to help the Pakistani military build an effective counter-insurgency force. The plan, that now goes to the US embassy in Islamabad, seeks to focus American military aid toward specific equipment and training for Pakistani forces operating in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas where al-Qaeda leaders and local militants hold sway, the NYT has written.

The paper also quotes US officials in Islamabad and Washington as saying that the US has paid tens of millions of dollars in inflated Pakistani reimbursement claims for fuel, ammunition and other costs.

But Pakistani officials deny accusations of overcharging, instead criticising American ingratitude for Pakistani counter-terrorism efforts that have claimed the lives of a thousand Pakistani soldiers and police officers.

The \$5 billion military aid to Pakistan was routed through a programme called Coalition Support Funds, which reimburses Pakistan for conducting military operations to fight terrorism. Under a separate programme, Pakistan receives \$300 million per year in traditional American military financing that pays for equipment and training, the paper reported.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani former prime minister Nawaz Sharif addresses the crowd during an election campaign meeting in Sukkar yesterday. Sharif, back from exile for next month's parliamentary elections, blasted President Pervez Musharraf as a failed leader largely under US control.

Cong leaders to take stock of situation after polls debacle

PTI, New Delhi

Stunned by the Gujarat debacle, senior Congress leaders would be meeting in New Delhi on Monday afternoon to go into the reasons as to what went wrong in the crucial Assembly polls.

A day after Narendra Modi-led BJP came back to power, Congress leaders Motilal Vora and AICC General Secretary BK Hariprasad would be interacting with the state PCC Chief Bharatsinh Solanki and Gujarat CLP leader Arjun Modwadia.

It is still unclear whether the leaders would have a meeting with party Chief Sonia Gandhi later.

Government failing on militants, says Benazir

AP, Larkana

Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto accused the government Sunday of failing to crush Islamic militants, days after a suicide bombing killed 56 people during prayers in a mosque.

Meanwhile, an army statement said a suicide bombing of a military convoy killed five civilians and four soldiers in the troubled northwest.

It said 13 civilians and 10 soldiers were also wounded in the attack in the town of Mangora in Swat district, where security forces have carried out several operations against followers of a pro-Taliban radical Islamic cleric.

Benazir's sharp criticism came hours before the latest suicide attack. She spoke as the campaign heated up for next month's parliamentary elections, with politicians addressing rallies around the country.

The former prime minister, speaking to about 25,000 supporters in her hometown of Larkana, said the ruling party of President Pervez Musharraf's government bore the blame for the rise of Islamic militancy.

"Militants gained power, and

the government's legitimacy weakened," Benazir said.

Though Pakistan is a key US ally in the war on terrorism, Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters have extended their influence over parts of the volatile northwest in the past two years.

They have launched numerous suicide attacks in recent months, usually targeting security officials and their families.

In the latest attack a suicide bomber, apparently targeting former Interior Minister Aftab Khan Sherpao, blew himself up Friday in a village mosque. Sherpao said the blast killed 56 people.

As interior minister, Sherpao had helped lead the government's fight against militants. He survived another suicide attack eight months ago.

Sherpao, who is also running for parliament in the Jan. 8 elections, said the latest bombing would not deter him from campaigning.

"I have a cause and it is to serve my country," he told reporters in Peshawar, a city adjacent to the capital, Islamabad.

Benazir escaped two suicide attacks in October when she returned to the country after eight years in exile.

Five killed in Egypt tower block collapse

AFP, Alexandria

At least five people including a young girl were killed when a 12-storey block of flats collapsed in the Egyptian port city of Alexandria on Monday, with many more casualties feared, a security source said.

Ambulances and civil defence teams rushed to the scene of the disaster in the Loran district in the east of the Mediterranean coastal city, where five bodies were pulled from the rubble.

The dead included a four-year-old girl, two women and two men, the source said, adding that four others had been injured and rescued.

"A large number of casualties" is still expected, however, to be found under the rubble of the building, the source added.

The source said the building was home to 40-50 people but that the accident happened in the morning, after many residents had left for work or school.

Local authorities had ordered the removal of the building's top two floors in 1995 because they contravened building laws but the order was not implemented, the source said.

Israel may relax policy for prisoner-release

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is trying to relax the criteria for releasing Palestinian prisoners, a move that could advance efforts to free a captured Israeli soldier, officials said Monday.

A key ally of Olmert's will convene a meeting of senior ministers Monday to ask them to approve the release of prisoners involved in attempted attacks on Israelis, officials said. Israel's stated policy is to refuse early releases to Palestinians involved in attacks on Israelis, but it has relaxed that policy in the past.

"We are in such a situation that, if we continue with the criteria that was used in the past, there will be no one else left to free," Ephraim Sneh, a lawmaker in the influential Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, told Army Radio. "If we want to free prisoners... and bring about the release of (Cpl.) Gilad Shalit, we will have to broaden this."

Hamas-linked militants captured Shalit in a June 2006 raid on an Israeli army outpost after tunnelling under the Gaza-Israel border.

On Sunday, Olmert ruled out truce negotiations with Hamas, and vowed to continue attacking militants in Gaza.

There have been almost daily reports of truce feelers from the embattled Hamas regime, which violently seized Gaza in June, and Israeli defence officials had said they were examining the proposals. But Israel doubts that Hamas can stop the rocket fire, and has said that the truce is unnecessary because its attacks on militants would stop, if the rocket attacks ceased.

The prime minister's office would not comment on the meeting. Olmert is not expected to participate but the discussion will be led by a confidant, Vice Premier Haim Ramon, the officials said. They spoke on condition of anonymity since they were not authorized to talk about the matter publicly.

Israel is holding about 9,000 Palestinians. Because so many families have members in Israeli prisons, their release is a central Palestinian demand and a key to building confidence between the two sides as they renew peace negotiations. Hamas is not involved in those talks.

BJP sees comeback trail in Modi's victory

AFP, New Delhi

India's opposition Hindu nationalist party, ousted from power nationally in 2004, said Monday it was on the "comeback" trail after its hawkish candidate's massive win in western Gujarat state.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's new confidence came after Narendra Modi, Gujarat's controversial chief minister, swept back to power Sunday in Gujarat, one of India's wealthiest but most religiously divided states.

The results were sobering for the ruling Congress Party, led by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi who married into a political dynasty founded by India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

"Rarely does the people's verdict in a particular state become a turning point in national politics," said federal Bharatiya Janata Party leader Lal Krishna Advani after Modi's win.

"The spectacular victory in Gujarat is indeed a turning point because it signals the BJP's comeback."

Modi has been a divisive figure

in Indian politics, accused by critics of turning a blind eye to religious riots in the state five years ago in which at least 2,000 people, mainly Muslims, were hacked, burnt and shot to death.

But to supporters, the impeccably groomed Modi is the man who has helped spur rapid economic development in the state, drawing massive investment, building roads and other infrastructure.

Modi romped home with close to a two-thirds majority, winning 117 seats in the 182-member state assembly and leaving Congress, which rules India at the national level, trailing with just 59 seats.

Political analysts said Modi had given a new thrust to a party that has been groping for talking points and careening from one political scandal to another since its surprise national defeat.

"There's no doubt it's a very big shot in the arm," said independent political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan, adding it could have a "larger resonance in India."

Modi campaigned on his record on development and security, pointing out no riots or terror

attacks had taken place in the state in recent years.

He also highlighted his reputation for personal honesty.

"I do not eat, nor do I allow others to eat," went one Modi slogan, referring to endemic bribe-taking in India.

Analysts said that his bribe-free reputation had been a key attraction.

"He appears to be the dedicated and clean yet effective and strong leader that citizens yearn for in a democracy," said Yogendra Yadav, a pollster with the independent Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

Congress, meanwhile, also made a poor showing in three other state elections this year.

Some analysts said the defeats owed more to a lack of strong regional leaders in Congress, viewed by many as the New Delhi-based Gandhi family's fiefdom, than to a change in the BJP's fortunes.

"It does not allow new groups and individuals to move up in the party," political scientist Imtiaz Ahmed wrote in the Times of India.

Woman caught with bomb under burqa: Afghan official

AFP, Asadabad

Afghan intelligence agents said Monday they had detained a woman hiding a bomb-filled waistcoat of the type used in Taliban suicide attacks under her all-covering burqa.

The 55-year-old woman was followed from the eastern province of Kunar after a tip-off and arrested in the town of Jalalabad, an official in Kunar's intelligence department told AFP.

"She was carrying the suicide waistcoat for the Taliban. We had intelligence reports that she was working for the Taliban," said the official, who asked not to be identified by name.

The woman was being questioned "to find out more about her network," he said.

Most Afghan women still wear the burqa, which was mandatory under the 1996-2001 Taliban government, and cannot be searched by men at security checkpoints.

The Taliban, the main Islamic militant group behind a bloody insurgency, have stepped up their attacks in recent years, notably their use of suicide bombings.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese students associated with the seven-party political alliance (SPA) stage a protest against an alleged encroachment of Nepalese lands by India in front of the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu yesterday. The students demanded the territories be handed over to Nepal, in some 54 places in 21 districts of Nepal.



PHOTO: AFP

Christian worshippers light candles at the Church of the Nativity, traditionally believed to be the birthplace of Jesus Christ, in the West Bank town of Bethlehem yesterday. The roar of drums and bagpipes echoed through a hopeful Bethlehem Monday as the faithful began flocking to the traditional birthplace of Jesus for the annual Christmas celebrations.

13 killed in Iraq train crash

14 Shia bus passengers kidnapped

AFP, Hillal Baquba

A train collided with a packed car at a level crossing in central Iraq, killing 13 people in the vehicle, including 11 children, a local police officer and a medic said yesterday.

The crash occurred on Sunday north of the city of Hillal in an area called Al-Sayahiyah, the police officer said on condition of anonymity.

"Thirteen people from the family of Hamid Hrat were killed when the train rammed into their car at the level crossing," he said, adding the dead children included six boys and five girls.

He said Hrat was a captain in the facility protection service, a specialised security force that guards infrastructure projects and government buildings across Iraq.

"It appears that the Opel car in which the family was travelling broke down at the level-crossing and the train coming from Basra to Baghdad crashed into it," the police officer said.

The train driver ran away after the crash, he added.

A medic from Hillal hospital confirmed receiving the bodies of the victims.

"It was a gruesome accident. The body parts of the dead were brought to the hospital yesterday. All the 13 members were killed instantly," Laith al-Massudi from the hospital told AFP.

Meanwhile, gunmen ambushed a bus near the restive Iraqi city of Baquba on Monday and kidnapped all 14 Shia passengers aboard, including women and children, police said.

The incident occurred near a village north of Baquba in the province of Diyala, northeast of Baghdad, Colonel Hazim Yassin from Baquba police told AFP.

"The bus was stopped at a fake checkpoint near the village of Albusheeh which is controlled by al-Qaeda. The passengers, who were Shias and many of them women and children, were kidnapped," he said.

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