

India promises US\$ 450m aid to Afghanistan

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India and Afghanistan yesterday agreed to fight terrorism unitedly with a firm resolve and asked the international community to recognize the pernicious effects of religious radicalism and New Delhi announced a fresh package of 450 million dollar of reconstruction projects for war-ravaged Afghanistan.

After his talks with visiting Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh termed the terror attack on Indian embassy in Kabul last month as an attack on Indo-Afghan friendship and vowed not to allow the incident from dissuading New Delhi from continuing its recon-

struction of the war-torn country.

India, which has already committed 750 million dollars of reconstruction projects in Afghanistan, yesterday announced a fresh assistance.

After his talks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai against the "backdrop of serious threat posed by terrorism to security and stability of Afghanistan, India and the region", Singh said the two leaders agreed to fight the menace "unitedly and with firm determination".

Addressing mediapersons along with Karzai, Singh said the two leaders decided that they will not allow terrorism to stand in the way of the boosting the friendly relations between their countries.

"We have decided not to allow

terrorism to come in our way. We have agreed to unitedly fight terrorism", Singh said and noted that Karzai's visit to India was taking place at a "critical juncture" in India, Afghanistan and the region.

"The attack on our embassy in Kabul on July 7 has tragically shown that terrorism has no barriers and is not bound by restraints," Singh said adding "it was an attack on the friendship between India and Afghanistan".

Condemning the embassy attack in Kabul as well as recent serial bombings in Indian cities of Bangalore and Ahmedabad, Karzai said Afghanistan and India face the same challenge of terrorism and "cold-blooded murderous activities".

Afghanistan to resume talks with Pakistan

THE DAWN, Kabul

Afghanistan accepted Pakistan's offer on Sunday to resume talks which the Kabul government had boycotted after accusing its neighbour of being behind a series of attacks.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani talked on the sidelines of the Saarc summit in Colombo on Sunday, their first meeting since July 15.

"At the suggestion of Pakistan, the Afghan side agreed to re-engage on all bilateral and multilateral forums," a presidential palace statement said.

Myanmar PM to attend Olympics

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's Prime Minister Thein Sein will attend the opening ceremony of the Olympics, state media announced yesterday but gave no details on his trip.

The government mouthpiece New Light of Myanmar said that General Thein Sein would leave "in the near future" to attend the opening ceremony Friday.

Myanmar's secretive junta rarely gives any information about the travels of top officials.

China is one of the military regime's few allies and a major trading partner.

The opening on August 8 marks the 20th anniversary of a national pro-democracy uprising in Myanmar.



PHOTO: AFP FILE

This photo taken on July 29, 2008 shows ethnic Uighurs chatting in Urumqi in China's far northwestern, mainly Muslim Xinjiang region. China's Olympic run-up stuttered yesterday, as it was reported that terrorists killed 16 policemen in Xinjiang's famed Silk Road city of Kashgar, raising the security temperature ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, which begin on August 8.

Families search among dead for kin in India stampede

AP, Anandpur Sahib, India

Family members moved through row after row of bodies overnight in a grim search for their loved ones among the 145 people killed in a deadly stampede at a remote mountaintop Hindu temple.

In many cases, families lost several relatives who were killed together as they went to the Naina Devi Temple in the foothills of the Himalayas Sunday to celebrate Shrawan Navratras, a nine-day festival that honors the Hindu goddess Shakti, or divine mother.

Mukesh Chhabra went to the temple with 11 family members to celebrate the recent birth of his son. Only five of them survived.

The 31-year-old farmer lost both of his parents, his wife, his 2-year-old daughter, his brother and sister-in-law and their 17-year-old daughter. He saved his infant son by passing him to a young man who was on a ledge above the main path, he said.

"There was a lot of shouting and pushing. People fell down and

could not get up. They just suffocated," he said.

Authorities said an investigation will be launched and offered compensation to families of the victims.

By dawn yesterday, only 12 bodies remained unidentified at the hospital in Anandpur Sahaib, a town near the temple where the disaster occurred. Volunteer workers from nearby temples helped relatives load the victims onto vehicles to be taken home for cremation.

Police said 145 people, many of them women and children, were killed and 37 injured after rumors of a landslide caused thousands of panicked pilgrims to stampede at the shrine. An estimated 25,000 people were on the mountain at the time.

Pilgrims already at the temple began running down the narrow path leading from the peak. There, they collided with devotees winding their way up.

With a concrete wall on one side and a precipice on the other, there

was nowhere to escape and they were crushed. At one point, a guard rail broke and dozens of people fell to their deaths.

But survivors said police were also partly to blame, with officers blocking the escape route below.

"The police did not allow people to step back. Meanwhile, people started coming down from above shouting go back, go back," said Ramesh Kumar Saini, who was at the temple. "Since the police did not allow the people to go back, this tragedy happened."

The result was horrific. The bodies of the devotees many dressed in brightly colored holiday clothes carpeted the path, intertwined with flattened iron railings. Many still held the flowers and food they planned to offer at the temple.

Visiting the scene, Himachal Pradesh state Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dharma announced an investigation into the cause of the disaster would be set up and said compensation of \$2,380 would be paid to the families of each victim.

Yudhoyono resists calls to dismiss ministers

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono rejected calls yesterday to sack two ministers embroiled in a corruption scandal, saying he would await the outcome of ongoing investigations.

A lawmaker has accused Development Planning Minister Paskah Suzetta and Forestry Minister Maimun Sambat Kaban of having taken money embezzled from the central bank in 2004.

Both deny any wrongdoing,

and they have not been charged with a crime.

"If the legal process proves they are guilty, I will remove them," the president told reporters after meeting the ministers at the presidential palace. "I'm not in a position to suspend their mandates as ministers."

National Police Chief General Sutanto and Attorney General Hendarman Supandji joined the president at the meeting, the Antara news agency reported.

The ministers were mentioned in testimony last week at the trial of

former central bank governor Burhanuddin Abdullah over the alleged embezzlement of 31.5 billion rupiah (3.4 million dollars) in bank funds in 2004.

Hanka Yandhu, one of two lawmakers charged in connection with the scandal, named the ministers as being among a group of MPs who were sitting on a committee that was considering changes to the central bank law.

He alleged that the two ministers received illegal payments to influence them to approve an amendment to the law.

Rescue efforts continue as 11 die during Mount K2 avalanche

AFP, Gilgit

Pakistani army helicopters airlifted two frostbitten mountaineers from K2 and tried to save another yesterday after a catastrophic ice fall on the world's second highest peak killed 11 climbers.

The avalanche is believed to be the deadliest single incident on the

28,251-foot (8,611-metre) Himalayan peak, which is widely acknowledged as far harder to scale than Everest with a fatality rate almost five times as high.

"Two Dutch climbers were brought by our people and their colleagues down to base camp from an altitude of 7,300 metres overnight," army officer Captain

Azimullah Beg told AFP by satellite telephone from K2 base camp.

"They were then picked up by army helicopter from base camp this morning and have now been shifted to hospital for treatment for severe frostbite," said Beg, identifying the climbers as Wilco Van Rooijen and Cas van de Gevel.

A second chopper went up to

help a stranded Italian but could not touch down and returned after a brief contact with the climber, Pakistani mountain guide Sultan Alam said.

"Our four high-altitude porters left a while ago and it is expected that they will bring the Italian climber down this evening," he told AFP from base camp, as the roar of a helicopter could be heard in the background.

The Italian, Marco Comortola, was unable to walk because of frostbite in his leg, officials said. Alam said he was getting food and drink from a Singaporean expedition in the area.

All three climbers were "badly affected and it appears that at least one of them would have his hand and leg chopped off. This is what our high altitude doctors believe," Alam said.

The climbers who died in Friday's avalanche were three South Koreans, two Nepalis, two Pakistanis, a Serbian, an Irishman, a Norwegian and a Frenchman, Alam and Beg said.

The disaster happened when a pillar of ice broke away in a steep gully known as the Bottleneck near the summit and swept away fixed lines used by the mountaineers as they made their descent on Friday.

"At least 11 climbers have died. This is one of the worst incidents in the history of K2 climbing," Alam said.

In Seoul, a mountaineering club on Monday confirmed that three South Koreans and two Sherpas were among those killed, and another two Korean climbers got to base camp before the avalanche struck.

Mountaineers die on K2

Worst disaster on the peak since 1986



An AFP graphics layout shows the region where Mount K2 is located. Inset a handout picture taken early in 2008 and provided by broadpeak08.blogspot yesterday shows French climber Hugues d'Aubarede at base camp of K2. D'Aubarede and Sherpa Karim are reported missing. K2, which is 8,611 meters (28,416 feet) high and known locally as Chogori or "King of Mountains", towers over the majestic Karakoram on the border of Pakistan and China.

New Lankan fighting brings death toll to 44

AFP, AP, Colombo

Heavy fighting across Sri Lanka's north left at least 44 Tamil Tiger rebels dead, the defence ministry said yesterday.

Thirteen rebels and three soldiers were killed in other clashes Sunday in the Mannar, Vavuniya and Welioya regions, bordering the rebels' de facto state in the north, said Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara, the military spokesman.

The new fighting occurred despite a cease-fire offered by rebels while leaders from eight South Asian countries met over the weekend in the tightly guarded capital, Colombo.

The heaviest fighting was reported in Mannar's Vellankulam area, a guerrilla stronghold that was seized by government troops on Saturday, Nanayakkara said. It was the last rebel stronghold in the area.

The rebels "attempted to retake the lost territory, but soldiers repulsed their attack," Nanayakkara said.



PHOTO: AFP FILE

Indian school principal G. Immanuel of The Seventh-Day Adventist Higher Secondary School addresses an assembly of students in Ahmedabad yesterday, while standing besides a display of items used to convey explosive material in a recent spate of bombings in the western Indian city. Schools and educational institutions in the city are warning pupils to report items or activities, which they think, might be suspicious in the wake of sixteen blasts on July 26. The blasts left 45 dead and more than 160 injured.

HK police to recheck security

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong's police said yesterday they would re-assess the security level of the Olympic co-host city after a suspected terrorist attack reportedly killed 16 policemen in China's northwest Xinjiang.

"Hong Kong police take a very, very serious view on the tragic incident in Xinjiang," Suen Kwai-leung, the city's assistant commissioner of police, told a news conference.

"Once we obtain more facts, we will conduct a very thorough assessment to see if the incident has any indication or implication on the overall security of Hong Kong, or more specifically, the Olympic equestrian events."

The southern Chinese city will host the equestrian events of the August 8-24 Olympic Games.

Suen said that all 4,000 police officers deployed are ready to provide security for the equestrian events.

'Mullah Omar operates govt from Pakistan'

PTI, New York

Taliban's reclusive leader Mullah Mohammad Omar is believed by Afghan and Western officials to be running the militant organisation from his base near Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province in Pakistan.

Mullah Omar runs a shadow government, complete with military, religious and cultural councils, and has appointed officials and commanders to virtually every Afghan province and district, just as he did when he ruled Afghanistan, the Taliban claim, the New York Times reported on Sunday.

He oversees his movement through a grand council of 10 members, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told the Times in a telephone interview.

Mullah Bradar, one of the Taliban's most senior and ruthless commanders, who has been cited by human rights groups for committing massacres, serves as his first deputy.

Russian writer Solzhenitsyn dies at 89

AFP, Moscow

Tributes poured in from around the world yesterday for Nobel prize-winning Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who died aged 89 after a life devoted to exposing the brutal Soviet Gulag prison system.

Recognisable in later life by his flowing beard and ascetic clothing, he had been frail for several years and died of heart failure late Sunday evening after going to bed following a day of editing, his son Stepan told AFP.

President Dmitry Medvedev hailed him as "one of the greatest thinkers, writers and humanists of the 20th century" and "an irreplaceable loss."

Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970 after depicting in harrowing detail the Soviet labour camps, where he spent eight years from 1945.

He toiled obsessively to unearth the darkest secrets of Stalinist rule and his work ultimately dealt a crippling blow to the Soviet Union's authority.

Solzhenitsyn's widow, Natalya, who is publishing his complete works, told Echo of Moscow radio that the writer had lived "a difficult but happy life."

The Soviet Union's last leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, said Solzhenitsyn's name will go down in Russian history.

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