

US-led coalition forces kill 25 militants, 8 Afghan hostages

Three die in Kabul suicide attack

AP, AFP, Kabul

A series of clashes and an airstrike in southern Afghanistan killed 25 militants and eight civilians held hostage by insurgents, the US-led coalition said in a statement yesterday.

Militants ambushed the coalition and Afghan troops along a road in the southern province of Uruzgan on Sunday, triggering gunbattles during which militants moved into a compound and took 11 civilians hostage, the statement said.

"Coalition troops called in close-air support to engage the militants hiding in the structure. They did not have knowledge of

noncombatants in the buildings at that time," the coalition statement said.

As a result, eight civilians were killed and three were wounded, the coalition said. The wounded civilians were taken to a coalition base for treatment.

US 1st Lt. Nathan Perry, a coalition spokesman, said three civilian hostages survived the airstrike in Khas Uruzgan district, including an infant, a man in his 40s and a woman in her 20s.

Juma Gul Himat, the provincial police chief, said six civilians, one child and five men were killed and three others were wounded. He could not immediately explain why the coalition said eight civilians

were killed.

Himat blamed the Taliban fighters for using civilians homes for cover during the attack, thus putting civilians in danger.

The coalition regularly accuses militants of using civilian homes they commandeer to attack foreign and Afghan troops.

Meanwhile, a suicide car bomb exploded near a military school in the Afghan capital Kabul on Monday, killing at least three people and injuring 12 others, officials said.

"A suicide car bomb exploded on the Pul-i-Charki road, killing three people and injuring 12 others, all civilians," top police official General Alishah Paktiawal told AFP.

Indian troops shoot dead prominent Kashmiri separatist

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops yesterday shot dead a prominent Kashmiri separatist leader and three other protesters as they tried to halt huge Muslim demonstrations in the revolt-hit region, witnesses said.

Sheikh Abdul Aziz, a former militant turned moderate political leader, was killed while taking part in a protest march close to the Line of Control, which separates the Indian and Pakistani parts of the Himalayan region.

A police official said three other protesters were killed in a day of fierce clashes in the disputed Kashmir valley. A doctor at Srinagar's main hospital, Manzoor Ahmed, confirmed Aziz died of a gunshot wound.

"We will spill blood for blood," Aziz's supporters chanted as they carried his body out of the hospital. Security forces immediately

imposed a strict curfew in Srinagar, the main city in Indian Kashmir and the hub of the 19-year-old revolt against New Delhi's control over the Muslim-majority region.

Aziz, who was 52, was a prominent member of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an alliance of moderate Kashmiri separatist groups at the forefront of the political struggle against Indian rule over part of Kashmir.

The shooting came as Indian security forces tried to prevent about 100,000 Muslims from marching towards the de facto border with Pakistan -- one of the biggest protests ever seen in Kashmir.

The marchers had reached a point just 40 kilometres (24 miles) from the Line of Control, despite repeated efforts by Indian police and paramilitary forces to break up the demonstration with tear gas, rubber bullets and warning shots.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian Kashmiri demonstrators hurl stones at Indian riot police as they stand amongst teargas canisters fired by police in Srinagar yesterday. One person was killed after Indian troops in Kashmir fired shots and teargas to stop thousands of Muslims marching to the Pakistani part of the divided region, officials said.

Pak clashes kill 6 civilians, 20 Taliban militants

AFP, Khar

Pakistani warplanes killed at least six civilians in a tribal area bordering Afghanistan yesterday after fierce clashes in which 20 Taliban militants were killed, officials said.

Jets pounded suspected Islamist hideouts after rebels attacked two security posts overnight, but some bombs hit civilian houses in the Bajaur tribal zone, a known haunt of al-Qaeda and Taliban militants, they said.

The violence comes after a week of some of the heaviest clashes ever seen in Bajaur and as al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, issued a call for jihad, or holy war, in Pakistan.

"The Taliban launched a big attack on Tor Ghundi fort and Iskandro post (in Bajaur). Security

forces responded and 20 militants were killed," a paramilitary official told AFP.

A local security official said fighter jets and helicopter gunships were called in after the battle and carried out air strikes lasting more than three hours.

"Some of the bombs dropped by jets on suspected militants' hideouts in Tauheedabad and Damadola villages also hit many houses killing six civilians and wounding 12 others," the security official told AFP.

There was no immediate information about casualties to security forces.

Residents said the fighting erupted at 1:00 am on Monday and bodies were scattered across farmland 20 kilometres (12 miles) east of Khar, the main town in Bajaur.

Lanka steps up attacks on Tigers: 46 killed

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan security forces have stepped up attacks against Tamil Tiger rebels in the island's north, leaving at least 44 guerrillas dead for the loss of two soldiers, the military said yesterday.

Troops advanced into territory held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at least three fronts in the vast Wanni region on Sunday, military officials said.

They said 10 soldiers were also wounded in Sunday's fighting. There was no immediate word from the Tigers about the military's latest claims.

The Tamils are fighting for an independent homeland.

rebels killed by troops to 5,745 since January, while 522 soldiers have died in combat during the same period, according to ministry figures.

The government has poured a record 1.5 billion dollars into this year's war effort and troops are now concentrating on dismantling the LTTE's de facto state in the north.

Colombo pulled out of a truce with the LTTE in January saying it had the upper hand in the long-running conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives since 1972.

The Tamils are fighting for an independent homeland.

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New Zawahri tape slams Musharraf

AP, Islamabad

In a rare English-language message partially aired Sunday that is believed to be from al-Qaeda's No. 2 leader, Ayman al-Zawahri claimed Pakistan is now "virtually ruled from the American Embassy."

The Pakistani ARY channel gave a copy of the tape, whose authenticity could not immediately be verified, to The Associated Press. However, an AP reporter who has reviewed his past recordings said the voice sounds like that of al-Zawahri.

It is not clear when the tape was made, but it includes apparently recent pictures of ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and others in the ruling coalition, indicating it was created since the February election that brought President Pervez Musharraf's foes to power.

India to join Air Force training exercises in Nevada

AP, Las Vegas

India's military pilots are expected to participate for the first time in Air Force training exercises above the Nevada desert, marking another step in steadily improving US relations with the Asian subcontinent nation since the Sept 11 terrorist attacks.

South Korean and French pilots will also take part in the combat exercises that begin Monday and will put about 65 airplanes in the skies over two weeks, Air Force officials said.

"This particular Air Force exercise is important because India is included among some very important allies," said Christine Fair, a South Asia specialist at the RAND Corp., a nonprofit think tank. "This is definitely an extension of an arc that has been mapped out since 2000, and it really signifies that what India and the United States have is a strategic relationship."

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