

Over 40 Taliban killed in Afghan clashes

AP, AFP, Kabul

US-led troops attacked a compound where Taliban leaders were meeting in western Afghanistan, killing 30 militants, American and Afghan officials said yesterday. Another 11 militants reportedly died in a separate clash in the south.

The coalition was striking back against insurgents opposed to the Western-backed government of President Hamid Karzai who have stepped up attacks on foreign and Afghan troops.

In the bloodiest incident, the coalition said its troops called in airstrikes on the compound in the Shindand district of Herat province on Thursday.

Some 30 militants were killed

and five others were detained, spokesman 1st Lt Nathan Perry said. The troops found a haul of weapons and ammunition inside the compound, he said.

An Afghan Defence Ministry spokesman, Gen. Mohammad Zaher Azimi, confirmed the clash but said five of the 30 dead were civilians.

It was not immediately possible to explain the discrepancy.

The operation was launched after an intelligence report that a Taliban commander, Mullah Siddiq, was inside the compound presiding over a meeting of militants, Azimi said.

Siddiq was one of those killed during the raid, Azimi said.

A roadside bomb in the country's east, meanwhile, killed a US coalition service member on

Friday, the US military said in a statement. The coalition did not provide other details on the incident or the victim's nationality.

"A coalition service member was killed during an IED (improvised explosive device) incident today in eastern Afghanistan," it said in a statement.

Separately, Afghan and international troops clashed Thursday with militants in Khas Urzgan district of Uruzgan province, killing 11 militants, said provincial police Chief Juma Gul Himat.

Three Afghan troops were wounded in the fight, Himat said.

Authorities recovered the bodies of the dead militants, he said.

While most of Afghanistan's violence affects the southern and eastern regions that border Pakistan, militants have also been

active in western areas bordering Iran.

In another clash Thursday involving airstrikes, the US-led coalition said its forces killed "multiple militants" in the northern Kapisa province.

The operation in Tagab district targeted a Taliban commander involved in weapons smuggling and suicide attacks against Afghan and foreign troops, the coalition said.

Tagab is close to where militants killed 10 French troops on Tuesday in the deadliest ground attack on foreign troops since the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001.

More than 3,400 people mostly militants have been killed in insurgency-related violence this year, according to figures from Western and Afghan officials.

Three dead in China-Myanmar border quakes

AFP, Beijing

The death toll from two earthquakes that struck China's border with Myanmar just minutes apart rose to three on Friday, while about 100 more were reported injured, state media said.

The toll is up from the one fatality reported after the quakes, measuring 5.0 and 5.9, hit Thursday in southwest China's Yunnan province, 200 kilometres (125 miles) from the city of Dali, a popular tourist spot.

The official Xinhua news agency said the first victim was a woman in her 30s, but did not describe the two other victims.

Most of the injured, including 20 who were seriously hurt, were treated at the People's Hospital of Yingjiang county, the report said.

It said the tremor destroyed six homes and damaged 4,056 others around the county, including 17 school buildings.



Hundreds of Shia Muslims march in a rally in the holy city of Najaf, 160km south of Baghdad, to denounce the surprise visit of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Iraq on Thursday.

US, Iraq close in on deal for pullout of US troops

AP, Baghdad

Iraq and the US pushed close to a deal Thursday setting a course for American combat troops to pull out of major Iraqi cities by next June, with a broader withdrawal from the long and costly war by 2011.

Subject to final approval by the top Iraqi leadership, the exit date for US troops would be December 2011, although the Americans insist on linking that target to additional security and political progress.

President Bush has long resisted a timetable for pulling out, even under heavy pressure from a nation distressed by American deaths and discouraged by the length of the war that began in 2003. But that has softened in recent weeks.

The timing has major political importance in both Iraq and the United States.

The two contenders to replace Bush

as commander in chief, Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama, spar almost daily over the future course of the war.

Obama wants all US combat forces out of Iraq within 16 months of his taking office, saying they are needed more urgently in Afghanistan. McCain says recent security improvements in Iraq show that decisions on the timing of further pullouts should be determined by circumstances on the ground rather than by prearranged timetables a position the White House has vigorously held until recently.

The administration has inched toward the Iraqi view that setting at least a target date for withdrawal would make it politically palatable for Iraq's government to accept a substantial US troop presence beyond this year.

The rationale for the pullout is that Iraqi security forces will be

ready to stand on their own, although it remains possible that some US military training role would continue. In Iraq, provincial elections are supposed to be held later this year, followed by national balloting in 2009.

In one key part of the draft agreement, private US contractors would be subject to Iraqi law, unlike at present, but the American side held firm in its insistence that US troops would remain subject exclusively to US legal jurisdiction, officials said.

Immunity remains the main point of contention between the two sides in finalising the agreement. The Iraqis are reluctant to allow US military contractors to have free rein when outside US bases and without any Iraqi legal authority over them, according to a senior US official who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe delicate negotiations.



A Palestinian woman and a boy sit on the ground outside their home as they watch Israeli special forces secure the area during a military operation into the West Bank village of Kfar Khalil south of Nablus yesterday.

30 killed in southern Philippine clash

AFP, Cotabato

Clashes left 30 rebels dead in the southern Philippines overnight, just hours after the government scrapped a controversial peace deal with the Muslim guerrillas, the military said yesterday.

The rebels were slain in villages bordering the Liguasan marshes around Maguindanao, said local military spokesman Colonel Julio Ando.

"All were killed in two days of simultaneous air and ground assaults," he said.

Major Armand Rico, an army official, said the number of soldiers wounded had risen to 12 as Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels fought the military offensive on their stronghold near Liguasan marsh.

"They are familiar with the terrain in the Liguasan marshland, they have expertise in moving there so the military had to use air

assets," Ando said.

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) said it had agreed with the government to provide an additional 250 metric tons of rice to help feed some 60,000 people displaced by the fighting in Maguindanao.

Some 220,000 people have been displaced since the fighting began two weeks ago, according to the WFP.

Rebel spokesman Eid Kabalu said Friday that "fighting continued today with the military using air and ground assets, apparently to get Commander Kato."

Umbra Kato is a rebel MILF commander who launched a series of attacks on villages and towns two weeks ago that have killed scores and displaced thousands of people.

Military reports say about 100 people have been killed in two weeks of fighting between the government and MILF.

Obama gears up for VP announcement

AFP, Chicago

Democrat Barack Obama was Friday putting the finishing touches to the unveiling of his choice of running mate after unleashing a fusillade of vitriol on White House rival John McCain.

The Republican came under withering fire from Obama after confessing to being in the dark about how many properties he owns, as the pair entered a still more intense phase of their contest just before the convention season.

Obama returned to his home in Chicago after a week-long tour of southern states, and was to stay huddled with top aides to roll out the closely guarded secret of who his vice presidential pick is.

The Illinois senator told reporters travelling with him in Virginia Thursday: "I've made the selection and that's all you're going to get."

The Democrat's choice of VP nominee will be unveiled at the latest at a campaign event Saturday in Springfield, Illinois, the town where Obama first launched his White House bid in February 2007, after first being revealed electronically to supporters via text message.

Republican McCain was also off the campaign trail Friday, finalising his own VP pick days before

next week's Democratic National Convention in Denver marks the formal start of hostilities for November's presidential election.

While both the candidates will be officially anointed their party nominees over the next fortnight, they have been locked in running battles for weeks already -- and Thursday saw some of the fiercest clashes yet.

Obama ridiculed McCain as being out of touch with everyday Americans in a tempestuous economic period after the Arizona senator, in an interview with Politico.com, could not say how many homes he owns.

"I think -- I'll have my staff get to you," McCain said. "It's condominiums where -- I'll have them get to you."

Aides said he had four houses, but Politico.com said it totalled seven -- the family ranch in Sedona, Arizona and condominiums mostly owned in the name of McCain's wealthy wife, Cindy. Politico itself said the number was eight.

"I suppose if you've got seven, maybe eight houses, the economy looks fundamentally sound to you," a fired-up Obama told a capacity crowd of 2,600 at a rally late Thursday in Chesapeake, southern Virginia.

Russian troops start Georgia pullout

But some will stay, says Moscow

AFP, Tbilisi

Russian forces began to pullout from parts of Georgia on Friday, but a top general said hundreds of soldiers would remain deep inside the country along the main strategic highway.

As the United Nations again failed to agree on a resolution on the conflict, Russia finally began to withdraw, in line with a French-brokered plan, from the strongly pro-Western ex-Soviet republic.

Troops poured into Georgia on August 8, initially to repulse a Georgian assault against Moscow-backed separatists in the South Ossetia region, then moving quickly to occupy areas beyond.

An international outcry has sent Russia's already chilly relations with the West into crisis.

Twenty Russian military vehicles carrying hundreds of troops headed north from near the Georgian city of Gori toward the separatist region of South Ossetia, an AFP reporter said.

The nine tanks, nine trucks carrying troops and two armoured

personnel carriers headed towards the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali.

"The troops are leaving," Russian Lieutenant Colonel Andrei Bobrun said at the scene. "By 10:00 pm (1800 GMT) all the Russian troops in the area will have left."

In the west of the country, troops left a barracks in Poti, a key oil port. However they were dug in at a checkpoint between the towns of Senaki and Zugdidi and also between Poti and Senaki.

Russia says 500 "peacekeepers" are to remain in a buffer zone around South Ossetia. An unknown number of combat troops also remain inside South Ossetia as well as another Moscow-backed separatist zone, Abkhazia.

In Moscow, the deputy chief of general staff, Anatoly Nogovitsyn, showed journalists a map detailing what he said would be Russian "peacekeepers" "zone of responsibility."

This includes control of a key highway linking the Georgian capital to the sea.

Military posts are to be established outside Poti and troops will

have the right to deploy anywhere on the road between Poti and Senaki, according to the map.

Two other stretches of the same road that come within the "zone of responsibility" flank Gori, just west of Tbilisi, the map showed.

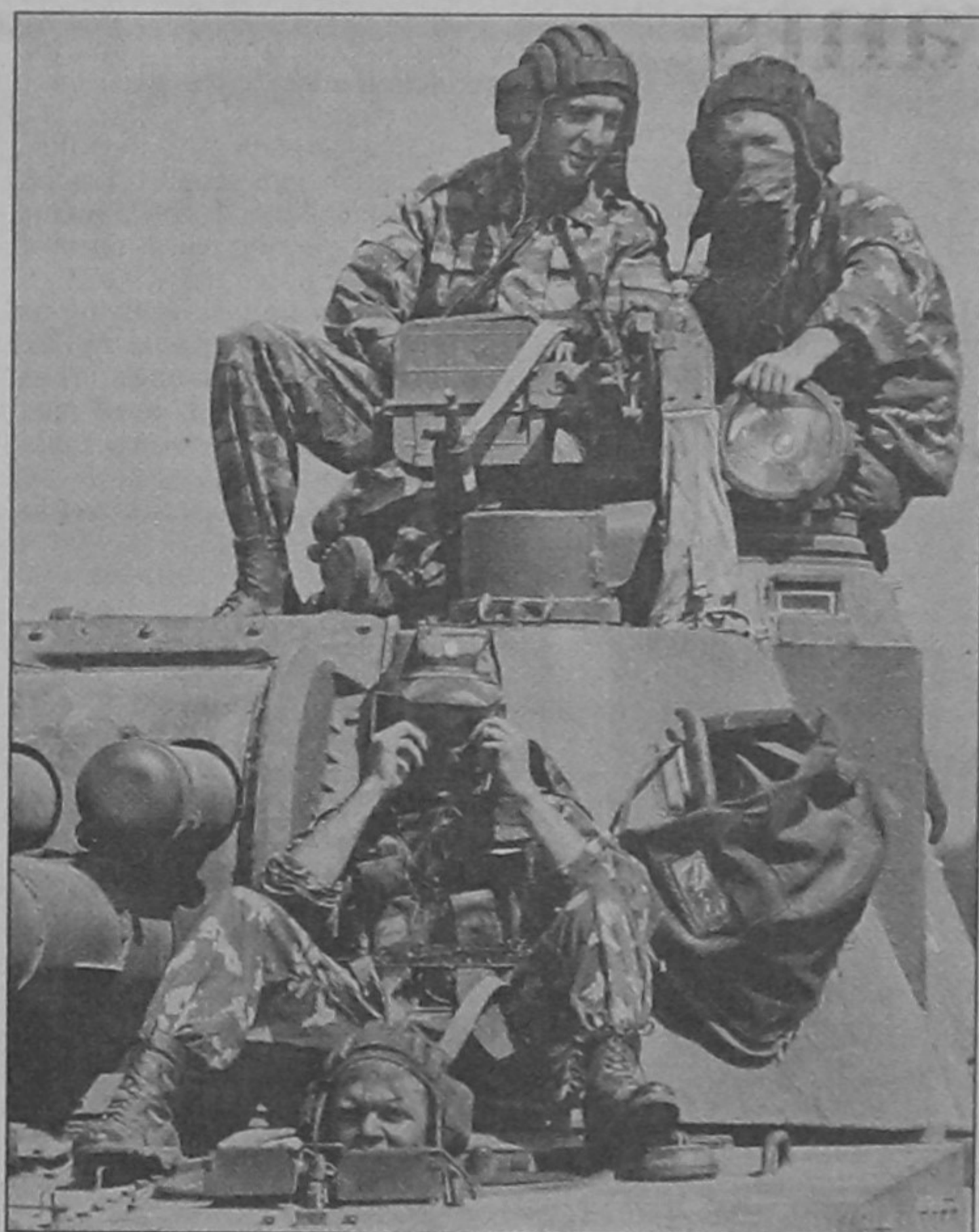
The deployments effectively strip Georgia's control of the main east-west road, a vital economic artery.

In addition, Novogitsyn said that "if needed we reserve the right to boost these forces with units from the Russian peacekeepers contingent."

Georgian National Security Council Secretary Alexander Lomaia told AFP that he would meet later with a Russian commander to discuss Russian deployment plans.

"We will listen to him, but of course it's not Russia that must decide these things unilaterally," he said, referring to the French-brokered peace plan.

Western capitals have rallied around Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who is seeking Nato membership for his country of just under five million people.



A Russian artillery unit leaves the flashpoint city of Gori yesterday, en route towards the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali. Twenty Russian military vehicles carrying hundreds of troops headed north from near the Georgian city of Gori toward South Ossetia.

Olmert grilled again over graft allegations

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was questioned by anti-fraud officers on Friday for the sixth time since claims emerged in May that he received illegal funds from a US financier.

As was the case in previous interviews, police spoke to Olmert, 62, at his official residence in Jerusalem, police sources said.

Dogged by six separate graft investigations, Olmert announced on June 30 that he would step down after his centrist Kadima party holds elections in mid-September, but insisted he was innocent of the allegations against him.

Israeli media said the officers were expected to question Olmert on several of the claims of wrongdoing in the years before he took office in 2006, when he was mayor of Jerusalem and trade and industry minister.

Friday's questioning was the sixth since allegations emerged in May that Olmert had accepted illegal funds from wealthy US financier Morris Lanksy to finance his political campaigns and his lifestyle.

'Warming threatens crucial Himalayan water resources'

AFP, Stockholm

Climate change poses a serious threat to essential water resources in the Himalayan region putting the livelihoods of 1.3 billion people at risk, experts said Thursday.

The mountainous region, home to the world's largest glaciers and permafrost area outside the polar regions, has seen rapid glacial melting and dramatic changes in rainfall, experts at the World Water Week conference in Stockholm said.

"Himalayan glaciers are retreating more rapidly than anywhere else in the world," said Mats Eriksson, programme manager for water and hazard management at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development.

Although high altitudes, remoteness and cooperation difficulties between countries in the region have made it difficult to conduct comprehensive

studies, Eriksson said it was obvious "the region is very strongly affected by climate change."

"The glaciers' retreat is enormous -- up to 70 metres (230 feet) per year," he told AFP.

Xu Jianchu, who heads the Centre for Mountain Ecosystem Studies in China, pointed out that temperatures on the Tibetan Plateau for instance were increasing by 0.3 degrees Celsius each decade.

"That's double the world-wide average," he said.

This has a large impact in a region where melting glaciers and snow account for about 50 percent of the water that flows down mountains, feeding into nine of the largest rivers in Asia.

The Himalayas stretch across China, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Myanmar, Bhutan and Afghanistan, and the mountain range thus constitutes a major source of water for some of the most populous parts of the planet.

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