



Egyptians search for survivors under the rubble of homes at the site of a massive landslide off Moqattam hill in northern Cairo yesterday. At least 20 people were killed and 22 injured Saturday when dozens of homes in northern Cairo collapsed after being hit by a massive landslide, Egyptian emergency services said.

20 people killed in Cairo rockslide

AFP, Cairo

At least 20 people were killed and 23 injured yesterday when dozens of homes in a northern Cairo shantytown were crushed by a massive rockslide, Egyptian officials said.

Disaster struck at 8:50 am (0650 GMT) when several huge boulders estimated by one official at weighing "hundreds of tonnes" each broke off Moqattam hill overlooking the capital's densely populated Manshiyet Nasser and struck into the district of Isbat Bekhit.

The section of hill that broke away was estimated at 60 metres (yards) wide and 15 metres long.

The official MENA news agency reported in the early afternoon that the toll stood at 20 dead and 23 hurt.

But local deputy Haidar Bardadi told Egyptian television he expected the toll to rise drastically, saying 35 homes had been crushed and between 150 and 200 people were trapped beneath the rubble.

Rescuers used their bare hands to shift debris in a desperate bid to

search for victims.

The reason for the rockfall, which came at a time when many people were still at home resting during the first weekend of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, was not immediately known.

But several witnesses said work had been taking place on the hill above the quarter for several weeks, and that the authorities had been warned about the dangers.

"There had already been some landslides, slightly hurting some people," said 42-year-old driver Abdel Latif Hossam, whose house was spared.

Labourer Sarghali Gharib, 24, told how he had lost eight members of his family - five sisters, a sister-in-law and her two children.

"It was horrible, like an earthquake. There had already been collapses, and the government did nothing to evacuate the district," he said angrily.

Police cordoned off the area and specialist dog handlers were deployed in the debris to try and locate survivors.

Suicide bomb, attacks kill 20 in Afghanistan

AFP, Herat

A suicide bomber killed a state prosecutor and five other people in Afghanistan yesterday, and nearly a dozen people died in other insurgency-linked violence, authorities said.

The suicide bomber, who had explosives strapped to his body and was disguised as a beggar, blew himself up inside a government building in the western province of Nimroz, its governor Ghulam Dashtir Azad said.

The blast brought down the single-storey building in the town of Zaranj on the southwestern border with Iran, Azad told AFP.

"We have recovered so far six bodies," he said. The dead were provincial attorney Anwar Shah Khan, his 20-year-old son, and his deputy and three civilians, Azad said.

"The whole building has collapsed. There might be more casualties," the governor said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack.

There has been a wave of suicide blasts in Afghanistan in the past three years, most of them claimed by Taliban extremists who are waging an insurgency against the US-backed government in Kabul.

Elsewhere in Nimroz, about 150 Taliban militants attacked a police post early Saturday, killing two policemen but losing eight of their own fighters, Azad said.

Also Saturday, insurgents attacked another police post, in Laghman province, near the Afghan capital Kabul, and killed one policeman, provincial police chief Abdul Karim Omaryar said.

The Taliban were in government between 1996 and 2001, when they were ousted in an invasion led by the United States and supported by Afghan anti-Taliban factions.

They have regrouped to put up

an insurgency that is said to have support from other extremist factions, including al-Qaeda, and radical elements based across the border in Pakistan.

The Afghan government is supported by about 54,000 soldiers in a Nato-led force and a few thousand more in a separate US-led force as it fights to rebuild its security forces and fight back the extremists.

A top US commander working in Afghanistan, Major General Jeffrey Schloesser, said Friday he needs more troops to counter growing insurgent violence amid signs the rebels were preparing for a winter campaign for the first time.

"I do believe that the level of significant activities, maybe violence, will be higher than any previous winter since 2002," Schloesser said in a video teleconference to Washington from his base in eastern Afghanistan.

US rearming Georgia under guise of aid Says Medvedev

AFP, Moscow

The United States is rearming Georgia under the guise of humanitarian assistance, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev charged on Saturday, following the arrival in Georgia of US warships laden with aid.

The rearming of the Georgian regime is continuing, including under the guise of humanitarian assistance. They've sent a whole fleet to provide humanitarian assistance," Medvedev told officials at a Kremlin meeting.

His charge came a day after the USS Mount Whitney, flagship of the US Sixth Fleet, arrived in the Georgia's Black Sea port of Poti close to military positions taken by Russian troops following last month's conflict with Georgia.

Other US Navy vessels have also docked in Georgia since the start of the conflict, drawing anger from Russian officials who have said their

presence in the Black Sea breaches an international shipping agreement.

"I wonder how they would like it if we sent humanitarian assistance using our navy to countries of the Caribbean that have suffered from the recent hurricanes," Medvedev said.

The Russian president was speaking in an address to the State Council, a largely symbolic body comprising the country's top federal officials, regional governors, industrial leaders and other influential elites.

"Russia is a state that has to be reckoned with from now on," Medvedev said in Saturday's speech, which also criticised Western countries for failing to support Russia in its confrontation with Georgia.

Russian troops surged into Georgia last month following an attempt by the Georgian army to retake by force the separatist province of South Ossetia, where tens of thousands of residents have Russian passports.

9 killed in Iraq violence

AFP, Mosul

At least nine people were killed in three attacks in Iraq on Saturday, including a car bomb in a northern Iraq market that claimed six lives and wounded 50, police and security said.

The deadly blast in Tal Afar came at around 11 am (08H00 GMT) and targeted a busy market in Al-Wehda, a central area of the city about 450 kilometres (280 miles) north of Baghdad.

Among the wounded 20 in a serious condition were rushed to a hospital in the Kurdish province of Dohuk.

Tal Afar is predominantly Shiite and west of Mosul, the capital of the province of Nineveh that is said by the US military to be the "last urban bastion of al-Qaeda" in Iraq.

Described in 2006 by US President George W. Bush as a security model, Tal Afar has since March 2007 been one of the most dangerous cities in Iraq.

Thai PM holes up at home as emergency rule is flouted

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's embattled Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej holed up at his heavily-guarded home on Saturday as protesters vowed to continue defying emergency rule and hold marches demanding he step down.

About 150 riot police surrounded the 73-year-old premier's home, where a government spokesman said Samak is resting, as a state of emergency across the capital continued through a fifth day.

"The prime minister has no official functions today. He is resting at home," Wichianchot Sukchotratsaid.

Samak declared emergency rule across Bangkok on Tuesday following violent street clashes between his supporters and anti-government protesters, who have occupied the

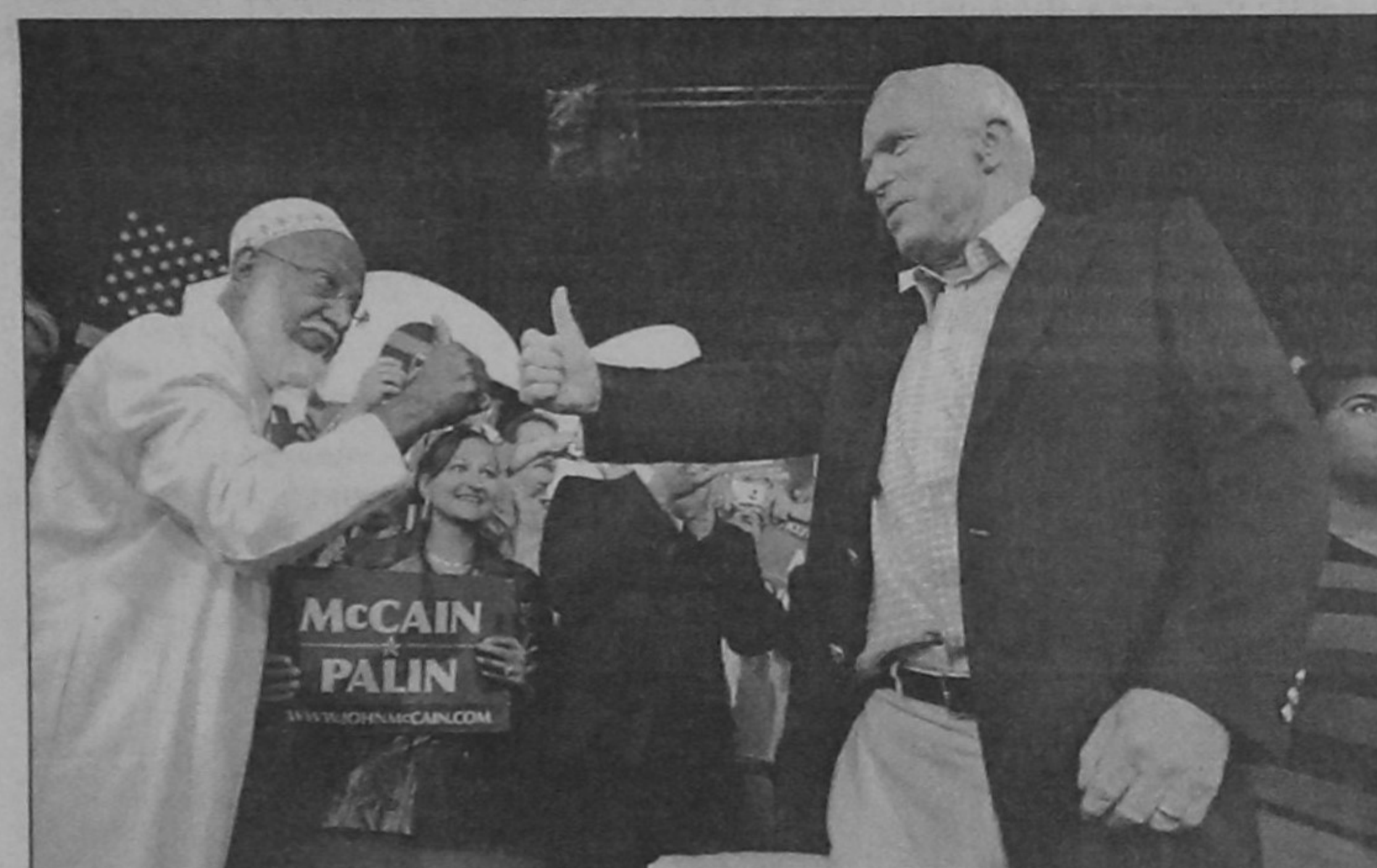
main government complex since August 26 calling for him to resign.

Emergency rule, which prohibits its gatherings of more than five people, continues to be flouted. Two university students were shot Friday night by unidentified gunmen as they marched towards Samak's home, and about 5,000 people remain at the capital's protest camp.

University students also planned to hold marches Saturday afternoon.

The military has not supported the emergency law, and Samak signalled his frustration on Friday at this increasing isolation.

"We have failed to tackle this problem through the courts, the military or by declaring a state of emergency. All has failed," he said, adding that emergency rule may soon be lifted.



Republican presidential candidate John McCain returns a thumbs up sign to audience member Taher F Rasheed of Keego Harbour, Michigan during a campaign event at the Freedom Hill Amphitheatre in Sterling Heights, Michigan on Friday.

'Obama, McCain want bigger role for Europe'

AFP, Avignon

Both US presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain, want the European Union to play a bigger role in world crises, the French presidency of the bloc said on Friday.

"Both candidates as well as the current US administration want the EU to be more politically present in the world," French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner told reporters in southern France.

Kouchner was speaking after the first of two days of talks with EU foreign ministers in the French city of Avignon on the Russia-Georgia conflict and transatlantic relations.

He said the ministers were working on a joint document on EU ties with the United States that would be sent to Washington and both US presidential candi-

dates once finalised at a new ministerial meeting in Paris later this year.

The French minister said the crisis in Georgia had shown that "European responses are not always exactly the same as American responses. They need to be complementary."

The EU's external relations commissioner, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, said Europe had to "raise our own game" to become an "equal partner to the United States."

"That means to be more clear and united in the positions we are taking," she said.

She argued that the Georgia conflict was a "good example" of Europe's ability to act and stay united in a crisis, and said the document debated on Friday was a "very good basis" for the future.

Modest US force cuts proposed for Iraq

Says defence official

AFP, Washington

Top US defence officials have recommended US President George W. Bush order only a modest US troop withdrawal from Iraq next year, with some of the forces shifted to Afghanistan, officials told AFP Friday.

The White House said Bush was expected to announce a decision next week on the recommendations, which were presented to the president on Wednesday by top Pentagon officials.

A senior defence official said the plan would shrink the number of US combat brigades in Iraq to 14 from 15 and reduce the overall size

of the force by some 8,000 troops by March.

"There will be well over 7,500 personnel reduced, with the reductions taking place as units complete their missions between now and early next year, with the major unit (a brigade combat team) leaving without replacement in mid-January," a senior US military official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

US commanders in Iraq have urged caution in reducing the size of the 146,000-strong force, worried that conditions remain fragile despite dramatic gains in security.

But Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has emphasised the need to

reinforce US and Nato troops in Afghanistan where conditions have deteriorated in the face of a resurgence by the Taliban.

A top US commander in Afghanistan said Friday he needs more troops and other resources for a winter offensive against the insurgents, who appear to be preparing to winter in Afghanistan in significant numbers for the first time, rather than sheltering in neighbouring Pakistan.

"I do believe that the level of significant activities, maybe violence, will be higher than any previous winter since 2002," said Major General Jeffrey Schloesser in a video teleconference from Afghanistan.

Afghans fed up with government, US

AP, Ghani Khil

The bearded, turbaned men gather beneath a large, leafy tree in rural eastern Nangarhar province. When Malik Mohammed speaks on their behalf, his voice is soft but his words are harsh. Mohammed makes it clear that the tribal chiefs have lost all faith in both their own government and the foreign soldiers in their country.

Such disillusionment is widespread in Afghanistan, feeding an insurgency that has killed 195 foreign soldiers so far this year, 105 of them Americans.

"This is our land. We are afraid to send our sons out the door for fear the American troops will pick them up," says Mohammed, who was chosen by the others to represent them. "Daily we have headaches from the troops. We are fed up. Our government is weak and corrupt and the American soldiers have learned nothing."

A strong sense of frustration echoed through dozens of interviews by The Associated Press with Afghan villagers, police, government officials, tribal elders and Taliban who left and rejoined the religious movement. The interviews ranged from the capital, Kabul, to the rural regions near the border with Pakistan.

The overwhelming result: Ordinary Afghans are deeply bitter about American and Nato forces

because of errant bombs, heavy-handed searches and seizures and a sense that the foreigners do not understand their culture. They are equally fed up with what they see as seven years of corruption and incompetence in a US-backed government that has largely failed to deliver on development.

Even with more foreign troops, Afghanistan is now less secure. "It certainly is a mess. Security is the worst that it has been for years. Corruption is out of control. It impacts every single Afghan," says Doug Wankel, a burly 62-year-old American who coordinated Washington's anti-drug policy in Afghanistan from 2004 until 2007 and is now back as a security consultant. "What people have to understand is that what ordinary Afghans think really does matter."

The fear and fury is evident among the neighbours at Akhtar Mohammed's walled home deep within Nangarhar province, reached by a dirt road along a dirty brown canal. A dozen men lie on traditional rope beds beneath a thatched roof. Some wear the full-bodied beard of the devout, with a clean-shaven upper lip. Others have dyed their gray beards a flaming orange with henna to show that they have made the pilgrimage to the holy site of Mecca.

They live barely an hour's drive from an errant bombing last month

that hit a wedding party and killed about 50 people. Khil Shah says his home was raided two months earlier, and troops killed his nephew, a high school student.

An old man sits by moaning. "No, no, they weren't Taliban. They were going to the bathroom. They weren't even carrying guns."

Villagers want to know why people who give false information are not arrested, and they say American soldiers still can't sift the good intelligence from the bad.

"But now this is seven years. I am hopeless. They haven't learned until now," says Akhtar Mohammed.

Nato's top Gen David D. McKiernan blames civilian deaths on insurgents who hide among the population. But the problem could also be one of strategy, says Robert Oakley, a former US ambassador and National Security Council staff member.

"There is a contradiction between wanting to minimise Afghan civilian casualties and minimising US military casualties," he says. "For the former, we should go on the ground. For the latter, go in from the air."

An air strike in Herat province about two weeks ago killed dozens of people. A US investigation concluded that most were Taliban, but the Afghan government and the United Nations say up to 90 civilians died, including children.

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