



Egyptians search for survivors under the rubble of homes at the site of a massive rockslide 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 rockslide, Egyptian emergency services said.

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 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 (0800 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.

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.

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

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 Islamic 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 hit.

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.

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 Dastgir Azad said.

The blast brought down the single-storey building in the town of Zarjan 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 casu-

alties," 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 Omeryar 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 forces.

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.



A view from a relief helicopter of the Indian Air Force shows the flood-affected Sapaul district in India's northeastern state of Bihar yesterday. Some villagers began trying to return to their flooded homes in eastern India as waters slowly receded, but officials warned the move was risky with a month of heavy rains still left.

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.

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.

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.

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"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.

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.

'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'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.

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

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