

US can negotiate with some Taliban

Says Khalilzad

AFP, Washington

The United States and the Afghan government can talk to moderate Taliban members, but only from a position of strength, Washington's envoy to the United Nations Zalmay Khalilzad said Sunday.

"I think we need to reach out to elements of the Taliban who are reconcilable," Khalilzad said on CNN.

"But to achieve success with regard to that, work in other cases would show that the government and the coalition need to be in a much stronger position than they are," Khalilzad said.

Hamas threatens suicide attacks in Israel

Tel Aviv prepares diplomatic ground for Gaza strikes, Hamas agrees to 24-hour truce

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas agreed yesterday to hold fire against Israel for 24 hours, but warned it would resume suicide attacks if the Jewish state launched an offensive against its Gaza stronghold.

The Islamists and other armed factions in Gaza have accepted "a calm for a 24-hour period following Egyptian mediation in exchange for the delivery of aid from Egypt," senior Hamas official Ayman Taha told AFP.

But Taha warned that Hamas would resume suicide attacks if Israel made

good on its threats to unleash a major assault against the Gaza Strip, where the Islamists seized power in June 2007.

"It is our right as an occupied people to defend ourselves from the occupation by all means possible including suicide attacks," he said.

The last time Hamas carried out a suicide attack in Israel was in January 2005.

Israeli foreign ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor declined to comment on the Hamas statement, saying "we have not received any announcement, neither directly or indirectly, nor via

Egypt."

Israel on Monday kicked off a campaign to muster international support for any major offensive to try to halt rocket fire from the impoverished Palestinian territory.

Tensions have mounted since the expiry on Friday of a six-month truce between Israel and Hamas in and around Gaza.

In a letter to UN chief Ban Ki-moon, Israel's envoy to the United Nations, Gabriela Shalev, said the government would respond to continuing rocket fire, Palmor said.



Israeli army tanks guard the southern Israeli border with the Gaza Strip near Kibbutz Nahal Oz yesterday, Hamas threatened Monday to resume suicide attacks if Israel launches an offensive on its Gaza stronghold.



Activists of Pakistan Shabab-e-Milli burn a US flag and an effigy of US President George W Bush during a protest in Karachi on Sunday in support of Iraqi journalist Muntazer al-Zaidi. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said that it is up to the courts to determine what action if any should be taken against the journalist who threw his shoes at US President George W Bush.

Iraqi shoe-thrower's apology was forced

Says brother

AP, Baghdad

The Iraqi journalist who threw his shoes at President George W. Bush says he would do it again and that he was forced to write a letter of apology after being tortured in jail, the journalist's brother said yesterday.

Muntadhar al-Zeidi's outburst during a Dec. 14 news conference with Bush and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has been repeatedly

broadcast worldwide, making him a symbol for opponents of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. Thousands of Iraqis have rallied to demand his release.

The prime minister's office said last week that al-Zeidi had written a letter of apology and asked al-Maliki to recommend a pardon. But his brother, Uday al-Zeidi, told The Associated Press that the letter was written against the journalist's will.

US missile strike from drone kills 8 in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar Islamabad

Twin suspected US missile strikes yesterday on a tribal area in northwest Pakistan known as a hub of Taliban and al-Qaeda activity killed at least eight militants, officials said.

The strikes were the latest on extremists in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan -- all said to have been launched by unmanned CIA aircraft -- that have raised tensions between Washington and Islamabad.

Two missiles "fired by US

drones" struck the villages of Karikot and Shin Warsak in troubled South Waziristan, a senior security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

It was not immediately clear if any senior Taliban or al-Qaeda operatives were killed in the strikes, which took place just minutes apart, he said.

Local intelligence sources said they believed the militants killed were members of local Pakistani Taliban groups.

The strikes caused huge fires in both villages, sending

panicked residents running into the streets, the security official said, adding that one house was damaged.

Hundreds of Taliban fighters later gathered in the two villages -- both outside Wana, the main town in South Waziristan -- to say funeral prayers for those killed, local residents told AFP.

The suspected US strikes have continued despite a warning by Taliban militants based in tribal territory last month that any more would lead to reprisal attacks across Pakistan.

US-Afghan operation kills 20 insurgents

Three die in suicide blast

AP, Kabul Ghazni

A recent US-Afghan operation along the border with Pakistan has killed about 20 insurgent fighters over the last month while three Afghans were killed in a suicide blast in Ghazni, an Afghan governor said yesterday.

The Afghan and US forces taking part in Operation Lion Heart are trying to pressure militants along the border between Afghanistan's Kunar province and the Bajur region in Pakistan.

Pakistani forces are conducting their own operation in Bajur in coordination with the US and Afghan forces.

The Ministry of Defence said Monday that dozens of militants have been killed and wounded over the last month. A spokesman said he couldn't give more precise numbers.

However, Kunar Gov. Sayed Fazeullah Wahidi said around 20 fighters have been killed over the last month, including two Arabs and two Pakistanis.

Foreign militants from Uzbekistan, Chechnya and Arab countries have joined the fight with Taliban militants who operate in the Afghan-Pakistan border region. al-Qaeda fighters also operate along the border.

Elsewhere in Afghanistan, a car bomb with two attackers exploded Monday near an Afghan governor's compound, killing one Afghan civilian and wounding seven. The two attackers also died, said Sayed Ismail Jahangir, the spokesman for the governor of Ghazni province in central Afghanistan.

Shops around the governor's compound were damaged, and shattered glass

littered the ground around the bombing.

Violence has spiked around Afghanistan the last two years. More than 6,100 people have died in insurgency-related violence this year, according to an Associated Press count of figures from Afghan and Western officials.

Meanwhile, a suicide blast in the centre of the southern Afghan city of Ghazni yesterday killed three people and wounded five others, police said.

The explosives, strapped to the attacker's body, detonated as he was being driven along a crowded road in Ghazni, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) south of the capital Kabul, Ghazni provincial deputy police chief Mohammad Zaman said.

Free Tamil civilians or face ban

Rajapaksa warns LTTE

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa yesterday threatened to outlaw the Tamil Tigers as a terrorist group if it did not allow Tamils living in its control to move to government-held areas.

Rajapaksa, who is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the defence minister, made the statement while addressing officials, groups of clergy, professionals and several others in Colombo.

"Rajapaksa called on the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) that with the dawn of 2009 it should release all innocent Tamil people it is holding hostage and in bondage using them as human shields and allow them to come to safe areas provided by the government and security forces," the president's office said.

"Failure to do this would

lead the government proscribing the LTTE and they (rebels) will face all its consequences as a terrorist organisation thereafter," Rajapaksa was quoted as saying.

The LTTE has already been listed as a terrorist group in various countries including India, the US and the 27-member European Union.

The LTTE was first banned in Sri Lanka in 1983 following the introduction of the emergency regulation. The ban was revoked when the regulation was withdrawn in 1987.

The ban was re-imposed in January 1998 after a suspected LTTE attack on the Buddhist tooth-relic temple in Kandy. It was revoked in 2002 after the signing of the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire agreement.

Rajapaksa's remarks came as heavy fighting raged in the districts of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, the last of the strongholds of the LTTE in the island's north.

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