

# Karzai calls for process of reconciliation with Taliban

Afghan insurgency battle could be worse than Iraq, warns US

AFP, Munich, Germany

Afghan President Hamid Karzai called yesterday for a process of reconciliation with the Taliban, and urged foreign forces in his country to do more to halt civilian casualties.

With elections approaching in August, Karzai also denied that Afghanistan was a narco-state or a failed state and insisted that vast progress had been made over the last seven years.

"This is the right time for me to call for a process of reconciliation," he said at a major security conference in Germany, addressing an audience that included top US and European officials.

"We will invite all the Taliban who are not part of al-Qaeda, who are not part of terrorist networks, who want to return to their country, who want to live by the constitution of Afghanistan and who want to have peace in their country and live a normal life, to participate, to come back to their country."

Karzai is set to stand again in presidential elections on August 20, but his popularity has waned amid allegations of

government corruption, growing opium production and an ever-more tenacious Taliban-led insurgency.

Nato nations and their partners fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan have had mixed reactions to Karzai's proposals to talk to the insurgents, with many saying they reject talks with militants who have blood on their hands.

"I would request the international community to back us in this, fully, and be of one view on this, not of divided views on this," Karzai said.

Karzai raised eyebrows in November when he said he would protect the fugitive leader of the insurgent Taliban, Mullah Mohammad Omar, in return for peace whether his international partners liked it or not.

He insisted though that the extremist Islamic leader, who is wanted by the United States, would have to accept the Afghan constitution, a pro-democracy document drawn up after the US-led forces ousted the Taliban regime in 2001.

The second-in-command of the al-Qaeda terror network, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, has said that Afghanistan's

attempt to negotiate with the Taliban showed weakness.

Karzai also renewed calls for international troops fighting the Taliban to do more to avoid civilian casualties, which have also served to damage his popularity among Afghans.

"The Afghan people consider themselves partners, and partners must not find themselves under attack," he told the conference participants, including US National Security Advisor General James Jones.

There are regular allegations of civilian casualties in operations, most often air strikes by US forces, but there are conflicting statements about how many people have been killed or wounded.

Meanwhile, the United States warned its allies Sunday that fighting the insurgency in Afghanistan could prove tougher than in Iraq and appealed, along with Britain, for more troops and equipment.

US ambassador Richard Holbrooke insisted that a new approach was required to turn the strife-torn country around, involving all of Afghanistan's neighbours and in particular Pakistan.



A tree burns close to a burnt out house at Kinglake, north of Melbourne yesterday. At least 84 people were killed and entire towns razed as wildfires raged across southeastern Australia in a disaster Prime Minister Kevin Rudd described as "hell in all its fury."

## Survivors tell of Australian bushfire horror

AFP, Sydney

Survivors of Australia's deadly bushfires yesterday described how a thick blanket of black ash blotted out the sun, leaving only a "horrible orange glow" as flames bore down on their homes.

Stunned residents hit by the worst fire, northwest of Melbourne, where most of the 35 fatalities have occurred, recalled how they lost loved ones to the flames and desperately tried to help the injured, including children.

Entire townships were razed to the ground by the raging inferno, with television footage showing the hamlet of Marysville reduced to smoking ruins.

Witnesses told of trees "exploding" with the intensity of the heat and recounted seeing burned-out cars abandoned as their owners scrambled to reach safety.

Strathewen resident Mary Avola escaped the flames but her husband of 43 years, Peter, died after they fled their home in separate cars trying to reach a

nearby sporting oval.

"He was behind me in another car. He was behind me for a while and we tried to reach the oval but the gates were locked," Avola told Melbourne's Herald Sun website.

"He just told me to go and that's the last time I saw him." Authorities have found his body.

Marie Jones said she was staying at a friend's house in Kinglake, where at least 12 people perished, when a badly burnt man arrived with his infant daughter.

She said the man told her his wife and other child had been killed.

"He was so badly burnt," she told the Melbourne Age's website.

"He had skin hanging off him everywhere and his little girl was burnt, but not as badly as her dad, and he just came down and he said 'Look, I've lost my wife, I've lost my other kid, I just need you to save (my daughter).'"

Jim, from Tanjil South, was still seeking refuge in his swimming pool with embers dropping in the water around him when

he called ABC radio to describe his ordeal.

"It's almost like midnight and we can smell the fire... we're still in the pool here and we can hardly see here, it's so dark," he said.

"We were copping embers from south-west of where we are... we've had some cracking lightning and we're copping smoke and dust and God knows what."

Another caller, Roger from Traralgon South, told how he tried to comfort his terrified daughter as powerful winds buffeted their home in furnace-like heat and an eerie orange glow dominated the sky.

"When I went onto the balcony I couldn't believe the heat," he said.

"It was so scary, my little girl, she's five years of age and... she's emotionally traumatised by what's happened today -- the horrible orange glow."

"She said 'Daddy what's going?' and I said 'It's OK darling you're fine.'"

Firefighter Richard Hoyle, told the Herald Sun it was the worst fire he had seen in eight years on the job.



An Israeli soldier walks past a poster for Israel's right-wing opposition Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem yesterday. Netanyahu remained the frontrunner ahead of next week's elections, according to three polls.

## Israelis turning 'right' going into election tomorrow

AP, Jerusalem

Israel seems to be moving rightward going into Tuesday's national election, with polls giving the edge to former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a tough stance on Mideast peacemaking that could lead to a collision with the new US administration.

Israel's complex coalition system and a large number of undecided voters could still allow Netanyahu's moderate rival, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, to squeeze out a victory.

But the war in Gaza, a looming recession and a pervasive belief that giving up land only draws more attacks have boosted Netanyahu and other hard-line candidates as Israelis prepare to choose a new 120-member parliament.

"How do I explain Israel's turn to the right?" asks analyst Reuven Hazan. "In three words: Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran."

The 23 days of fighting in the Gaza Strip last month

appear to have nourished Israel's self image as a besieged nation surrounded by enemies even though moderate candidates like Livni and Defence Minister Ehud Barak can claim political points for having helped wage the popular war. Both those candidates favor evacuating territory to make room for a Palestinian state.

But of all the contenders for prime minister, Netanyahu seems to best channel the current mood. The polished, baritone-voiced politician with flawless English sees confronting threats as the No. 1 priority rather than chasing an elusive peace deal with the Palestinians.

"Last time I voted for Barak and we tried to be nice to the Arabs and you see what we got," 37-year-old Jerusalem resident Elan Benaroush said, referring to the rocket attacks and Hamas takeover of Gaza that followed Israel's 2005 withdrawal from the territory. "We have to be strong. It's a security vote."

Opinion polls indicate that

right-leaning parties together may garner a majority of about 65 seats in the next parliament, the Knesset.

But surveys also say the lead of Netanyahu's Likud Party over Livni's centrist Kadima Party has narrowed, with an edge of just two or three seats. If Kadima surpassed Likud on election day as the biggest party, President Shimon Peres would likely ask Livni to form the next government.

About a quarter of Israel's 5.3 million eligible voters were undecided in the campaign's final days, polls said.

Even with a late victory, however, Livni would not be able to form a government without bringing hawks on board. That would put her in the same position she was in three months ago, when she failed to put together a coalition and triggered the current election by refusing to cave in to the right's demands for corruption charges forced Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to resign.

## Trial date set for Iraqi who threw shoes at Bush

AP, Baghdad

The Iraqi journalist who threw shoes at former President George W. Bush will face trial Feb. 19 on the original charge of assaulting a foreign leader, a judicial official said Sunday.

Muntadhar al-Zaidi, 30, who is considered a hero by many Iraqis for his bizarre protest, has been in custody since the Dec. 14 outburst at Bush's joint news conference with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

He had been due to face a trial in December on a charge of assaulting a foreign leader but his defence team won a delay as it sought to reduce the charges to simply insulting Bush.

But Bayrdar told The Associated Press that the trial will begin on Feb. 19 and the charge of assaulting a foreign leader will stand.

## Cong will return to power, says Sonia

CNN-IBN, New Delhi

The political climate is heating up as parties sounded their poll bugle on Sunday. UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi addressed grassroots-level leaders in the Capital while Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi spoke on the BJP's political resolution in Nagpur.

Sonia Gandhi and Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi launched the party's election campaign from Ramli Grounds in Delhi on Sunday.

Addressing state and district presidents, Sonia made suggestions to strengthen the party and its working, something both she and Rahul have been stressing upon if the party has to improve its tally in elections.

The party's organisation is particularly non-existent in crucial states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Orissa. The Congress is likely to pass a political resolution which will outline the party's manifesto for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Sonia said the party-led UPA Government has kept the aam admi, or the common man, as the focus of its economic policy during the past five years and was "ready, prepared and confident" to face the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. Addressing the massive gathering of the party's district chiefs and grassroots workers, the Congress President said the party wanted people to reaffirm faith in it.

"The aam admi has been the overriding force of our economic policy. We have worked towards the welfare of farmers, the empowerment of women and welfare of weaker sections. We want people to reaffirm faith in the Congress. We are ready, we are prepared, we are confident," Sonia said.



Congress President Sonia Gandhi (L), Senior Leader AK Anthony (C) and AICC General Secretary Rahul Gandhi (R) attend the Congress party's National Convention of Block Congress Committee (BCC) and District Congress Committee (DCC) presidents in New Delhi yesterday. The 'foot soldier' of the Congress converged in the capital to interact with the party's central leadership as part of a mega exercise to rev up the cadres for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.



People navigate through floodwater in the Moroccan town of Souk Larbaa, near Kenitra. A communique from the Moroccan interior ministry has stated that the recent flooding is estimated to have affected nearly 5000 inhabitants of towns encompassed in a 7000 hectare area.

## Nato seeks Russian help to keep Kyrgyz base

AFP, Moscow

Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer on Sunday urged Russia to use its influence to keep open an airbase in Kyrgyzstan used by Western forces as a link to Afghanistan, Echo of Moscow reported.

"If Nato and Russia will cooperate on this question... I hope the Kyrgyz government's decision will be final," De Hoop Scheffer said in an interview with the radio station in Munich.

"I hope Mr Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov... could help persuade the Kyrgyz president, so that Russia and Nato can cooperate in relation to Afghanistan," said De Hoop Scheffer, referring to talks with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov.

The Nato chief was speaking after Russian and Western officials met at an international security conference in the German city described by Ivanov as "very positive."

## NEWS ANALYSIS

## US-Iran ties tense after Obama offer

AP, Munich

Vice President Joe Biden was there along with a senior Iranian official and at first glance, that's about all that can be said for the first public opportunity to make good on President Barack Obama's proffered hand to Tehran.

Negative feelings at the Munich Security Conference seemed to outweigh the Obama administration's recent positive messages on when or if eye-to-eye talks with Iran could begin.

The United States, while opening the possibility of direct talks, has not relented on its demands that Tehran resolve international concerns over its nuclear program and its alleged support of terrorists.

At the conference in Germany, the two sides have shown they are still mistrustful after decades of enmity since the seizure of the American Embassy and US hostage crisis during Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Iranian parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani said

America had much to apologize for before his country could consider sitting down at the table. He accused Washington of causing untold human suffering through decades of failed US policies on Israel, Iraq, Iran and Palestine.

The next day, at which Biden was the featured speaker, Larijani was conspicuously absent.

Biden repeated Obama's offer of talks and rewards, but sternly warned that unless Iran showed willingness to compromise "there will be (further) pressure and isolation."

American allies at the meeting also piled on Iran.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned Tehran of stricter UN Security Council sanctions if it rejects a US overture; French President Nicolas Sarkozy urged Russia to join the West in seeking harsher UN penalties if necessary; and British Foreign Secretary David Miliband told the Islamic Republic that the US offer "is not going to get any better," while urging con-

tinued pressure.

But there were a few positive signs that Obama's offer was not made in vain.

Larijani at one point spoke of a "golden opportunity for the United States" suggesting that if Washington went far enough in conciliatory signals Tehran could respond in kind. And he said several times that the US needed to change "to a chess game instead of a boxing match," indicating that Iran would be receptive to more subtle US negotiating tactics.

A European official said Larijani held a private meeting Saturday with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and appeared interested in the US offer to talk.

The official, who demanded anonymity in exchange for sharing confidential information with The Associated Press, said Larijani "kept talking about the unacceptability of the 'carrot and the stick'" suggesting Iran was looking for a more finely tuned approach from the West than offers of blandishments coupled with threats.