

Pakistan pushes Taliban out of Bajaur

Says military commander

AFP, Khar

Pakistan said yesterday it had forced Taliban militants out of a key battleground in the global fight against extremism.

The six-month battle with Islamist insurgents in the remote Bajaur district is seen as pivotal to the country's fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Heavy artillery and helicopter gunships have pounded Bajaur, one of Pakistan's seven federally-administered tribal areas (FATA) along the Afghan border, in a bid to flush out militant bases, killing hundreds.

"We think that we have secured this agency," said major general Tariq Khan, the commander of forces fighting in Bajaur, using a local word to refer to the district.

"They have lost. They have lost their cohesion out here," Khan told reporters flown by helicopters from the capital, Islamabad.

Khan said some troops may be withdrawn from the area but the bulk would remain and rule out any concessions to the militants like those given to Taliban in the restive former tourist region of the Swat valley.

"There will be a gradual reduction of the army but the army is not going to pull out for some time," Khan said, adding that in the other five tribal districts the forces would finish military operations by the end of year.

"The agreement in Swat was completely in different circumstances," he said.

Nuclear-armed Pakistan's new civilian government launched the Bajaur offensive in August last year, largely in response to US pressure to stop militants attacking foreign troops in Afghanistan.

The operation has seen the deaths of 97 soldiers from the Pakistan army and the paramilitary Frontier Corps, while 404 troops were injured, he said.

Khan said about 50 percent of the

militants were Afghans and some Sudanese and Egyptians had been killed in Bajaur in the initial stages of operation.

There was no independent verification of the military victory but the Taliban see Bajaur as a key strategic district they cannot afford to lose, analysts have said.

To the east is Swat, where the Taliban have called an indefinite ceasefire following a nearly two-year insurgency, while on the Afghan side is a long frontier with the Taliban hotspot of Kunar province.

Khan recommended fencing the rugged and porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan to prevent the cross-border movement of Taliban militants.

He described the ceasefire declared by the Taliban on Monday as "a face-saving statement".

"We have not accepted that ceasefire. There was no question of ceasefire, the resistance has melted, dissolved. It is not there," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian supporters of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine attend a rally in support of the Egypt-brokered inter-Palestinian dialogue in Gaza City yesterday. Rival Palestinian groups Fatah and Hamas agreed on Feb 26 to work together to set up a unity government after Egyptian-sponsored reconciliation talks aimed at ending long-running factional feuding.

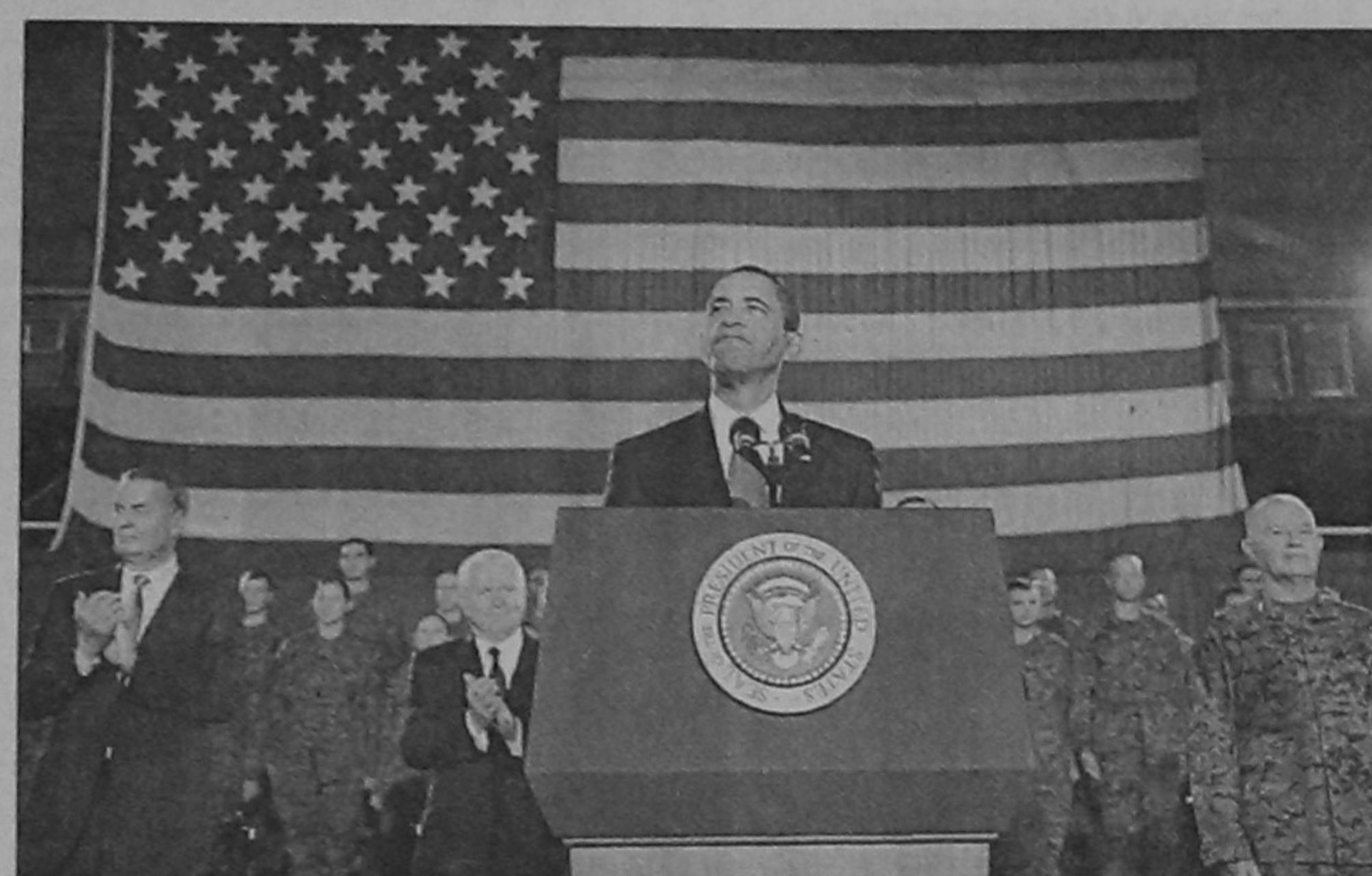


PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama speaks on Friday at Goettge Memorial Field House in Camp Lejeune Marine Corps Base, North Carolina. Obama set a date of August 31, 2010 for the end of US combat operations in Iraq, and said he intended to fully withdraw all troops by the end of 2011.

Iraq hails Obama plan But Baghdad still needs US help

AFP, Baghdad

Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi on Saturday welcomed the pullout of US combat troops outlined by President Barack Obama but stressed that Washington still has a "great responsibility" to help Iraq.

"We welcome the commitment of the US administration to withdraw its troops from Iraq as scheduled," said Hashemi, in a statement issued by his office.

Hashemi, a Sunni Arab, said Iraq would continue to develop its fledgling security forces but stressed that the job of the United States and the international community was far from over.

"Iraq will still need the international community for some time to build a state of law, and the United States has a great responsibility in this area," he said.

On Friday, Obama ordered

an end to US combat operations in Iraq by August 2010, and a complete withdrawal by 2011, eight years after a US-led coalition invaded the country to remove dictator Saddam Hussein from power.

A post-2010 interim force of between 35,000 and 50,000 will stay on to help Iraq with counter-terrorism and training.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton phoned Hashemi on Friday to say the shift was "natural in the light of improved security and the desire of the US government to move away from military operations to focus on civilian and humanitarian efforts in the reconstruction of Iraq," the statement said.

Iraqi newspapers also welcomed the US move but said the still fragile nation had to take stock of its ability to defend itself against both an ongoing insurgency and foreign interference.

Emergency plane landing in Romania: All 51 safe

AP, TIMISOARA, Romania

A Romanian plane carrying 51 people made a safe emergency landing in western Romania on Saturday and all the occupants escaped injury, officials said.

The Carpathian flight's front landing gear became stuck and the aircraft circled Timisoara International Airport for almost two hours, using up its fuel to avoid a potential fire before it landed on a bed of foam laid out by firefighters, officials said.

The Saab 2000 aircraft was carrying 47 passengers and four crew members on its flight from the Moldovan capital, Chisinau, to Timisoara, airport spokeswoman Carmen Stoica said.

The Emergency Inspectorate said at least 10 ambulances and three fire engines were waiting for the stricken plane.

BJP edges Congress in cyberspace polls warfare

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

In what promises to be a keen electoral contest to determine who rules India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has already taken an early lead over the Congress -- in cyberspace warfare.

With general elections involving some 700 million voters only two months away, the BJP -- perhaps taking a leaf from the Barack Obama style of campaigning -- is targeting voters who are mostly young and net-savvy.

"Advani for prime minis-

ter" is the theme of five campaigns by the BJP on more than 2,000 websites, including those of the US, British and Pakistani media, which Indians often frequent.

Produt Bora, convenor of the BJP's IT cell, said: "We are the leaders in the use of Internet for elections."

So far there has been no similar effort from the Congress. But the party has shown it can use the Internet if it wishes.

In the Rajasthan assembly contest late last year, it launched an Internet campaign with video ads.

Obama pledges no long-term designs on Afghanistan

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama promised Friday that the United States has no long-term designs on Afghanistan as his administration switches focus to the war-torn country with its pullout from Iraq.

Obama, who on Friday announced an 18-month timeline to end combat operations in Iraq, is planning to send another 1,700 US troops to Afghanistan as part of a fresh push to fight Taliban and al-Qaeda extremists.

The new US president made clear he was well-aware of the sentiments of the Afghan people, who have fiercely resisted foreign invaders from the British to the

Soviets.

"One of the things that I think we have to communicate in Afghanistan is that we have no interest or aspiration to be there over the long term," Obama said in an interview with PBS public television.

"There's a long history, as you know, in Afghanistan of rebuffing what is seen as an occupying force and we have to be mindful of that history as we think about our strategy," he said.

The Obama administration is conducting a review of its "war on terror" strategy in Pakistan and Afghanistan and this week held three-way talks in Washington with foreign ministers of the South Asian neighbours.

Nepali ruling parties assent to palace massacre probe

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kathmandu

Nepal's ruling coalition headed by the Maoists Saturday agreed to institute a fresh probe into the nation's darkest tragedy eight years ago in which king Birendra and his entire family were gunned down in the tightly guarded royal palace here.

At a meeting headed by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda, the five parties agreed to form a panel

to guide the government into starting a new probe into the massacre in which 10 royals were killed on June 1, 2001.

An inquiry commission formed by the then government of prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala blamed crown prince Dipendra for the killings and said drugs and alcohol had stupefied the prince, who took his own life at the end. However, the report has always been regarded with disbelief by Nepalis.

US will not take part in UN racism conference

AFP, Washington

The United States has decided against taking part in a UN-led conference on racism after it quit the previous session in 2001 over claims of anti-Semitism, US officials said.

"We're not going to further engage in Durban II," a senior State Department official told AFP on the condition of anonymity, referring to the conference scheduled for April 20-21 in Geneva.

A US delegation took part

in the preparatory talks in Geneva on February 16 and made proposed changes to a resolution expected to be adopted at the conference, which Canada and Israel have said they would boycott.

According to a statement issued by State Department spokesman Robert Wood later Friday, the "document being negotiated has gone from bad to worse, and the current text of the draft outcome document is not salvageable."

Mumbai terrorists did come through sea Says Antony

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kochi

India on Saturday dismissed Pakistan's contention that the 26/11 terrorists did not use the sea to enter Mumbai, saying "thorough investigations" had proved that the men did take that route.

Speaking at a function at the Cochin Shipyard Ltd (CSL), Defence Minister AK Antony said: "After the 26/11 incident, our agencies have done thorough investigations and come to the conclusion that the attackers had come through the sea route."

Indian Navy chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta reiterated the point at the same function: "We all know our investigating agencies are competent and have provided excellent documents that this (the arrival of the attackers) has hap-

pened over the sea route."

Both men were reacting to Pakistani Navy chief Admiral Noman Bashir's claim on Friday that Mohammed Ajmal Kasab, the lone Mumbai terrorist caught alive, did not sail to India.

"There is no proof that Kasab took the sea route," Pakistani Navy chief Admiral Noman Bashir said at a press conference in Islamabad.

At the same time, he admitted that patrolling the waters on the Pakistani side of the international border off the Gujarat coast was "difficult" due to the dispute over the Sir Creek.

India says Kasab and nine other Pakistanis had set sail from Karachi, hijacked a trawler after entering Indian waters and finally used a rubber boat to sneak into Mumbai Nov 26, 2008 and embarked on a killing spree that lasted over 60 hours.

5th Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines-East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) Summit



(L-R) Philippine's President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah pose for a photo prior to the 5th Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines-East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) Summit during the 14th ASEAN summit in Hua Hin yesterday.

Giant seabird's fossilised skull found in Peru

AP, LIMA, Peru

The unusually intact fossilised skull of a giant, bony-toothed seabird that lived up to 10 million years ago was found on Peru's arid southern coast, researchers said Friday.

The fossil is the best-preserved cranium ever found of a pelagornithid, a family of large seabirds believed to have gone extinct some 3 million years ago, said Rodolfo Salas, head of vertebrate palaeontology at Peru's National History Museum.

The museum said in a statement that the birds had wingspans of up to 20 feet (6 meters) and may have used

the toothlike projections on their beaks to prey on slippery fish and squid. But studying members of the Pelagornithidae family has been difficult because their extremely thin bones while helpful for keeping the avian giants aloft tended not to survive as fossils.

"Its fossils are very strange, very rare and very hard to find," Salas told The Associated Press.

The cranium discovered in Peru is 16 inches (40 centimetres) long and is believed to be 8 million to 10 million years old, based on the age of the rock bed in which it was found.



A palaeontologist cleans a fossilised bird cranium at Peru's National History Museum in Lima on Friday.

US woman swaps two kids for cockatoo, 175 dollars

AFP, Washington

Police in the southern US state of Louisiana have arrested a woman who allegedly traded two young children for an exotic bird and a bit of cash, the lead detective on the case said Friday.

Donna Greenwell, a 51-year-old long distance trucker, has been charged with aggravated kidnapping and is being held in jail on a bond of 100,000 dollars after she allegedly swapped a four- and five-year-old in her care for a cockatoo and 175 dollars, the lead detective on the case, Keith Dupre, said.

The story began several weeks ago when Greenwell pulled her cattle truck into a livestock dealer's to make a delivery, Dupre said.

A couple -- 27-year-old Brandy Lynn Romero and her husband Paul, 46 -- had put up a flier at the dealer's, advertising a cockatoo they had for sale for 1,500 dollars.

"Ms Greenwell saw the picture of the cockatoo along with the phone number, and with her raising birds already, she called them up," Dupre said.



PHOTO: AFP

Taiwan's pro-independence activists form the numbers "228" at a Taipei square yesterday in memory of a massacre on this day 62 years ago. Thousands of islanders were killed in the 1947 crackdown by the Kuomintang troops and the massacre remained taboo in Taiwan for decades under the rule of the late nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek until then president Lee Teng-hui made the first official apology in 1995.

Abbas insists on leading Gaza rebuilding

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas on Saturday insisted his government should spearhead postwar reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip days before a major international donors' conference.

"We expect rapid international aid from all parties to completely rebuild Gaza," Abbas told reporters after meeting the European Union's top diplomat Javier Solana in the Israeli-occupied West Bank town of Ramallah.

"We also expect that as in the past there will be one mechanism, the Palestinian Authority,"