

Eight killed in US missile strikes in Pakistan

Pak cleric demands Islamic courts in 2 weeks

AFP, AP, Peshawar/Mingora

At least eight people were killed yesterday in two suspected US missile strikes in northwest Pakistan, near the Afghan border, security officials said.

"Two missiles fired by a suspected US drone hit a compound in Saragha, in tribal South Waziristan region, killing at least eight suspected militants," a security official told AFP.

The region, bordering Afghanistan, is a known haven for Taliban and al-Qaeda extremists.

"It was a Taliban sanctuary, which was destroyed in the attack," another security official said.

"Some foreigners were possibly among those killed in the attack," he said.

This was the fourth missile strike by unmanned US aircraft since President Barack Obama came to power.

A suspected US missile strike on Feb 16 destroyed an Afghan Taliban camp and killed 26 in Pakistan's northwest tribal

area of Kurram.

Pakistan is a key ally in the US-led "war against terrorism." But the strikes have fuelled anti-American sentiments in Pakistan and particularly in the tribal belt, where Washington says al-Qaeda and Taliban sanctuaries exist.

The lawless tribal areas have been wracked by violence since hundreds of Taliban and al-Qaeda rebels sought refuge in the region after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan toppled the Taliban regime in late 2001.

Meanwhile, a hard-line cleric sent by Pakistan to talk to the Taliban demanded Sunday that the government create Islamic courts in a northwest region by mid-March, a deadline that could undermine peace talks already alarming the West.

Pakistan agreed last month to impose Islamic law in the Swat Valley in a bid to pacify the former tourist haven near the Afghan border that is now largely under militant control. The Swat Taliban and the

military agreed to a ceasefire after months of fighting that has killed hundreds and displaced up to one-third of the valley's 1.5 million residents.

The talks have raised concerns in Europe and the United States that a peace deal could turn Swat into a safe haven for Taliban fighters. Pakistan has deflected the criticism, saying it is merely responding to longtime local demands for a more efficient justice system, a desire exploited by militants to gain followers.

The provincial government made the pledge to establish Islamic courts to Sufi Muhammad, a pro-Taliban cleric whose son-in-law heads the Swat Taliban. Muhammad said Sunday he was unhappy with the government's pace on fulfilling its promise.

"I'm not seeing any practical steps for the implementation of the peace agreement, except for ministers visiting Swat and uttering words," the elderly cleric told reporters in the main Swat city of Mingora.



Pakistani paramilitary soldiers stand guard on a destroy market in the remote Bajaur Agency on Saturday. Pakistan said it had forced Taliban militants out of a key battleground in the global fight against extremism.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

A handout picture released by the official website of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei shows Iraqi President Jalal Talabani (C) meeting with his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Khamenei (R) in Tehran on Saturday.

Iran urges Syria to back Palestinian unity

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday called upon Syria to cooperate in supporting Palestinian unity, reconstructing the war-torn Gaza Strip and in punishing Israel.

"Both our countries should be active in supporting the unity of Palestinian groups, rebuilding Gaza and in prosecuting the Zionist leaders as war criminals," Iran's vice president, Parviz Davoudi, told reporters.

Davoudi, in a press conference with visiting Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri, urged Syria to be "more alert about political tricks of enemies."

Iran -- a close ally to Syria -- is a staunch supporter of the Islamist Hamas movement, which controls Gaza and does not recognise its archfoe Israel.

War between Hamas and Israel in December and January killed more than 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis while causing extensive damage in the Hamas-controlled Palestinian enclave.

Hamas is boycotted by major Western donors who consider it a terrorist organisation and who want their aid for reconstruction work in Gaza to be channelled via the Palestinian Authority, headed by president Mahmoud Abbas.

Stressing "common positions" held by Syria and Iran, Otri said that the two nations will enter talks aimed at agreeing preferential tariffs in a bid to establish free trade.

Gaza to get cash to rebuild if Hamas stands back

AFP, Cairo

Major donors are expected at a meeting in Egypt today to pledge billions of dollars to reconstruct the Gaza Strip, but only if the enclave's rulers Hamas agree to play no role in spending the cash.

The donors are demanding that the money be handled by the Palestinian Authority, which the Islamist Hamas evicted by force from the narrow coastal strip in June 2007.

"We expect rapid international aid from all parties to completely rebuild Gaza," Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas told reporters on Saturday.

"We also expect that as in the past there will be one mechanism, the Palestinian Authority," he said after meeting EU foreign policy supremo Javier Solana in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

The Palestinian Authority and Hamas each want to lead the rebuilding effort, but Western countries -- which blacklist Hamas as a terror group -- have said they will work

only with Abbas.

"I would like to insist that the mechanism used to deploy the money is the one that represents the Palestinian Authority," Solana said. "I don't think there is a need for new mechanisms."

Star delegate at the aid conference in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh will US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who will reportedly arrive bearing a cheque for 900 million dollars.

Saudi Arabia is expected to reaffirm a commitment to provide one billion dollars towards reconstruction, and the European Union has said it will grant 554 million dollars to the Palestinian people in 2009.

Donor countries from the January 2008 Paris conference will reiterate a pledge of 7.4 billion dollars in aid to the Palestinians in the three years 2008-2010, of which three billion has so far been distributed.

Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad has said he is seeking 2.8 billion dollars to rebuild Gaza.

Iran back in IAEA spotlight

AFP, Vienna

The UN atomic watchdog will take its first look at Iran's nuclear programme since the change of president in the United States at a meeting starting today.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will also study Syria's nuclear activities and discuss who could replace the watchdog's director general Mohamed ElBaradei who is to stand down in November, diplomats said.

The IAEA's six year-old investigation into Iran's nuclear activities is deadlocked, with Tehran refusing to suspend uranium enrichment, despite repeated UN sanctions. It is also stonewalling questions on the possible military dimensions of past nuclear work.

This regular spring meeting of the IAEA's 35-member board of governors will be the first since US President Barack Obama took power and said could be ready for direct talks with Iran.

But Iran's first satellite launch and the announcement that its first nuclear power plant in Bushehr could go on line within

months have heightened proliferation concerns in many western countries.

So is the assessment, by some analysts, that Tehran may soon have sufficient nuclear material to build a bomb.

According to the IAEA, Tehran now has 1,010kg of low-enriched uranium hexafluoride from its enrichment activities at a plant at Natanz.

That "is sufficient for a nuclear weapons breakout capability," according to David Albright, president of the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security and an expert on Iran's nuclear programme.

A breakout capability is when there is sufficient low-enriched uranium, which is used for nuclear fuel, to turn into high-enriched uranium (HEU) needed for an atomic bomb.

While IAEA experts put the amount needed at about 1,700kg of LEU, some analysts believe that smaller quantities might be enough.

Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, insisted that Natanz was not configured to produce HEU.

Stem cell breakthrough now goes one step further

AFP, Paris

Pioneering work by Japanese stem-cell researchers two years ago has taken a major step forward, helping the quest for versatile, grow-in-a-dish transplant tissue, according to papers published yesterday.

Two teams have combined ideas to devise a safer technique for reprogramming skin cells so that they become "pluripotent" stem cells -- fundamental cells that then grow into specialised organs.

Their effort builds on an award-winning breakthrough in 2007 by Shinya Yamanaka of

Kyoto University.

He and his team introduced four genes into skin cells, reprogramming them so that they became indistinguishable from embryonic stem cells.

That achievement conjured the distant vision of an almost limitless source of transplant material that would be free of controversy, as it would entail no cells derived from embryos.

But the downside of the technique for creating these so-called induced pluripotent stem cells (iPS) is that the genes are delivered by a "Trojan horse" virus.



PHOTO: AFP

Former British prime minister and Middle East envoy Tony Blair (2nd R) visits Beit Hanun in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday.

Asean urges Myanmar to follow democracy roadmap: Thai PM

AFP, Hua Hin

Southeast Asian leaders urged Myanmar's junta to follow its so-called roadmap to democracy during an "open" discussion with the country's prime minister, Thailand's premier said Sunday.

The annual Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) summit was marred on Saturday when Myanmar Prime Minister Thein Sein blocked a rights activist from attending a meeting with the bloc's leaders.

Myanmar has long been a headache for Asean, which faces persistent criticism that it has failed to use its influence to persuade the military-ruled nation to introduce reform and free political prisoners.

"We had an open discussion on Myanmar where the prime minister of Myanmar briefed us on developments," Thai Premier Abhisit Vejjajiva, who holds the rotating chairmanship of Asean, told a press conference.

"Asean leaders encouraged him to continue cooperation with the United Nations and to make sure that the roadmap continues according to plan," Abhisit said.

Book names Bush among dubious money-makers

ANI, New York

Former US President George W. Bush has been named among such businessmen as have faced corruption charges, in an upcoming HarperCollins book.

In the book "Get Rich Cheating," Jeff Kreisler salutes dubious money-makers like Ken Lay, Dennis Kozlowski, and Conrad Black.

"(Bush) ran unsuccessful baseball and oil companies, made questionable stock trades, schemed his way into the presidency, ran it like a fraudulent corporation, hid his reasons, played dumb, refused to take responsibility and enriched those around him," the New York Post quoted him as writing.

PRESIDENTIAL POLLS DATE

Afghans accuse Karzai of 'sabotage'

AP, Kabul

Afghan political leaders yesterday accused President Hamid Karzai of trying to "sabotage" the country's presidential election after he asked the Election Commission to explore moving the vote up four months.

Karzai released a decree Saturday directing the commission to set an election date that adheres to the Afghan constitution, which calls for a vote 30 to 60 days before May 22, when Karzai's five-year term expires.

The commission previously set the vote for Aug. 20, saying an election could not be held sooner because of security concerns, heavy

spring snows in the Afghan mountains and ballot distribution issues.

Lawmakers have said they would not recognise Karzai as president after May 21, meaning the country faces a potential constitutional crisis come spring.

But Afghan political leaders were not happy with Karzai's gambit to move up the vote, either.

The spokesman for the National Front, a group of opposition lawmakers, said it would be impossible to hold elections in the spring because of security, logistical and financial issues, but he called Karzai's move an attempt to "sabotage" the vote.

Afghanistan offers cash for 'terrorist' tip-offs

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan government yesterday launched a scheme to offer rewards of up to 10,000 dollars for tip-offs that thwart insurgent attacks in Kabul, as the city braces for new militant strikes.

The scheme is aimed at pulling the public into securing the city after several insurgent attacks, including February 11 strikes on three government buildings that left 26 people and eight attackers dead.

Through advertisements in the media and posters the government is offering half-a-million afghani (10,000 dollars) for information leading

to the arrest of militants planning attacks in Kabul, interior ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary told AFP.

"This is a new initiative to fight terrorist activities and get people involved in strengthening the Kabul city security," he said.

"The terrorists don't come from the sky to get into the city, they come from somewhere," he said.

The scheme is similar to the US "Rewards for Justice" programme that offers cash for information that stops attacks or results in the capture of men like al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar.



PHOTO: AP

A stone tablet engraved with symbols at least 2,500 years old is seen at the Southwest Script Museum on Feb 5 in Almodovar, southern Portugal.

Experts trying to decipher ancient language

AP, Almodovar, Portugal

When archaeologists on a dig in southern Portugal last year flipped over a heavy chunk of slate and saw writing not used for more than 2,500 years, they were elated.

The enigmatic pattern of inscribed symbols curled symmetrically around the upper part of the rough-edged, yellowish stone tablet and coiled into the middle in a decorative style typical of an extinct Iberian language called Southwest Script.

"We didn't break into applause, but almost," says Amílcar Guerra, a University of Lisbon lecturer overseeing the excavation. "It's an extraordinary thing."

Global warming may delay start of monsoon

AFP, Chicago

Global warming could delay the start of the summer monsoon by five to 15 days within the next century and significantly reduce rainfall in much of South Asia, a recent study has found.

Rising global temperatures will likely lead to an eastward shift in monsoon circulation which could result in more rainfall over the Indian Ocean, Myanmar and Bangladesh but less over Pakistan, India and Nepal, the study found.

It could also result in longer delays between rainy seasons and intensify the risk of deadly floods by leading to a significant increase in average rainfall in some coastal areas of western India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

That could have a major impact on agriculture, human health and the economies of the region, warned study author Noah Diffenbaugh.

"Almost half of the world's population lives in areas affected by these monsoons, and even slight deviations from the normal monsoon

pattern can have great impact," said Diffenbaugh, interim director of Purdue University's Climate Change Research Centre.

"Agricultural production, water availability and hydroelectric power generation could be substantially affected by delayed monsoon onset and reduced surface runoff."

The atmospheric conditions that lead to reduced rain also can lead to intensification of extremely hot conditions, said lead author Moetasim Ashfaq, a graduate student at Purdue.