

Afghanistan backs US plan as fighting rages

18 insurgents killed

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan welcomed Friday a revised US strategy to fight extremism as authorities announced they had killed 18 insurgents and an Afghan troop killed two foreign soldiers for unknown reasons.

US President Barack Obama announced a focus on militant bases in Pakistan and on building the Afghan security forces in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have made gains since being removed from government in late 2001.

The situation is increasingly perilous. It has been more than seven years since the Taliban was removed from power, yet war rages on, and insurgents control parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, he said.

The US president said al-Qaeda was actively planning attacks on the United States from its safe-haven in Pakistan and

vowed to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat" Osama bin Laden's group.

The Afghan government "particularly appreciates the recognition that the al-Qaeda threat mainly emanates from Pakistan," President Hamid Karzai's chief spokesman, Homayun Hamidzada, told AFP.

Karzai has long called on his international allies to focus the "war on terror" on Pakistan, where the Taliban and al-Qaeda set up after the 2001 US-led invasion that removed them from power.

Kabul also welcomed Obama's pledge of 4,000 US soldiers to train Afghan security forces because it would allow Afghanistan to "take increasing charge as the international support eventually will taper off," Hamidzada said.

This is on top of 17,000 troops Obama pledged in February, most expected to be deployed to the insurgency-hit provinces

in the south.

Afghan security forces are increasingly playing a larger role in counterinsurgency operations for which Afghanistan mostly depends on a better-equipped international force numbering about 75,000 troops.

In a rare incident between the security forces, an Afghan soldier opened fire on US-led coalition troops in northern Afghanistan Friday and killed two of them, wounding a third, the Afghan and US militaries said.

The Afghan then killed himself, they said in a joint statement that did not give a motive for the killing or the nationalities of the foreign troops.

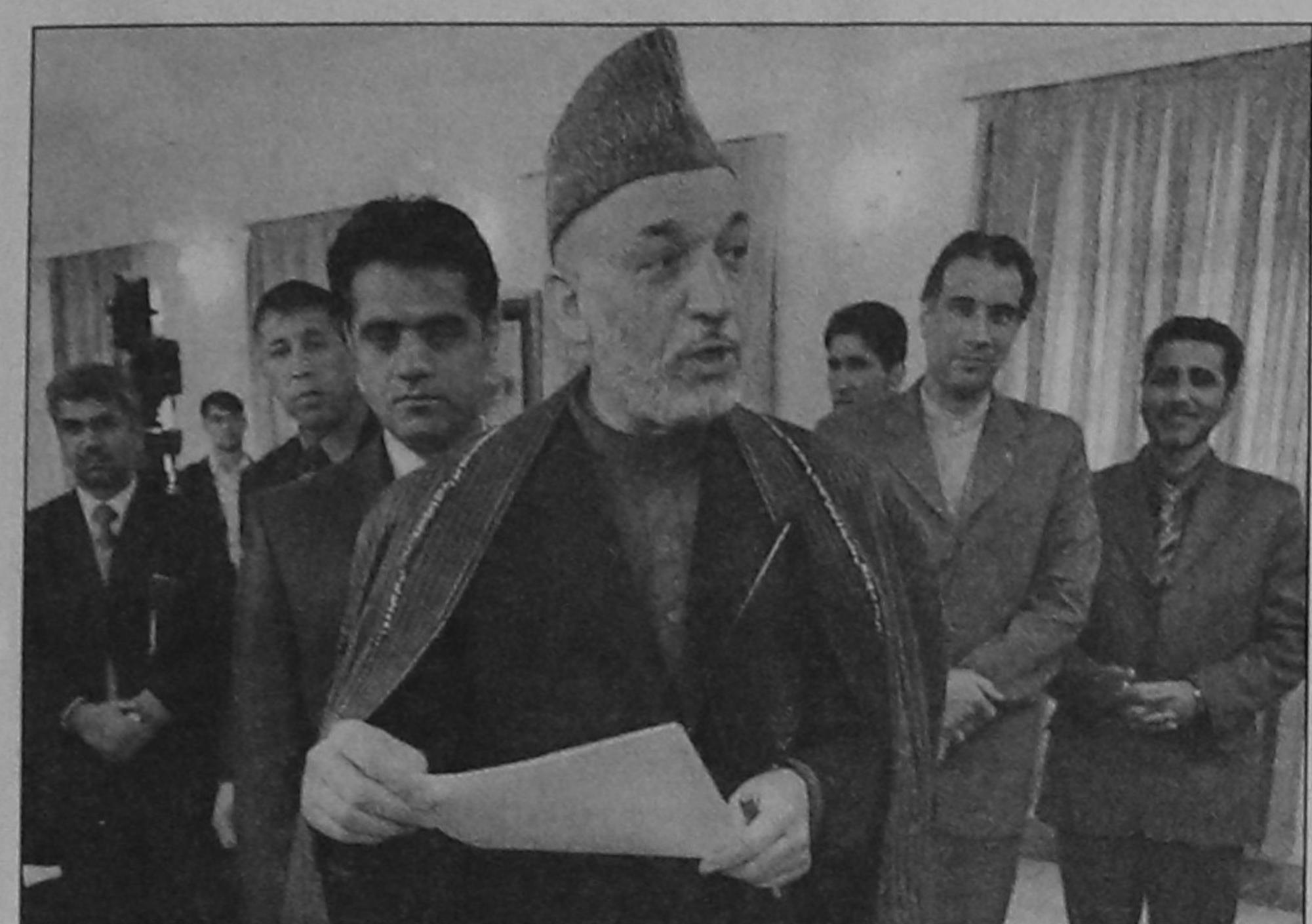
The incident was under investigation, they said.

Afghan and international security forces meanwhile announced several fresh clashes with insurgents.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani tribesmen gather as they offer prayers for the suicide blast victims during a funeral ceremony in the northwestern tribal town of Jamrud yesterday. Grief-stricken relatives and residents buried the victims of a suicide bombing at a northwestern Pakistan mosque that left 50 people dead.



27 killed as Philippines troops, rebels clash

AFP, Cotabato

Twenty Muslim separatists and seven soldiers have been killed in fighting in the southern Philippines as the rebels Saturday accused the army of undermining the prospect of a return to peace talks.

About 60 Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels attacked a security patrol Thursday near the town of Mamasapano on the island of Mindanao, about 10 kilometres (six miles) from the provincial capital where President Gloria Arroyo was scheduled to visit, said Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Ponce.

Arroyo went ahead with her visit on Friday, as clashes escalated and 20 MILF fighters were killed, the military spokesman added. Seven soldiers were also killed the same day.

"Clearing operations are still ongoing," Ponce said, adding that five soldiers had been wounded and taken to a military hospital near here.

Arroyo was aware of the ongoing fighting nearby during her visit to Maguindanao province, said a provincial official who was part of the welcoming party.

"The president appeared unmindful of her security, anyway the fighting was far away," the official added.

MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu confirmed the clashes but alleged the military started it when they attacked a community where some of the rebels' families lived. He said only two MILF fighters were killed, and claimed the military suffered more casualties than it reported.

Palestinian negotiator warns peace process may not survive

Arab summit eyes unity as hawks rise in Israel

AFP, Washington/Doha

The chief Palestinian peace negotiator warned yesterday the Middle East peace process may not survive if the new Israeli government fails to accept a two-state solution for the crisis.

"The peace process lives on borrowed time,"

Saeb Erakat wrote in an article in The Washington Post. "With its credibility at stake, it will not survive another round of failed negotiations -- and neither will the two-state solution."

Erakat said the conservative Israeli government led by Prime Minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu must unequivocally affirm its support for the two-state solution and the establishment of a viable and independent

Palestinian state based on 1967 borders. "Without these commitments, Palestinians have no partner for peace," he said.

The Palestinian diplomat also urged Israel to implement an immediate and complete freeze on settlement activity, including the construction of Israel's security wall.

Meanwhile, Arab leaders stage their annual summit in Qatar on Monday, determined to make a show of unity as hawkish right-wingers prepare to assume power in Israel in what is seen as a threat to Middle East peace.

Leaders of the 22-member Arab League will seek to close ranks split largely over how to respond to Israel's 22-day onslaught on the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, and also amid the growing influence of Shia Iran in the region.

Indonesian dam burst: 100 people still missing

AFP, Jakarta

Rescue workers in Indonesia searched yesterday for 100 people still missing after a dam burst sending a torrent of water crashing into a Jakarta suburb, as the official death toll rose to 77.

Hundreds of buildings collapsed when a wall of water broke through the man-made earthen dam early Friday as residents slept in their beds.

The impact of the Situ Gintung dam has killed 77 people and injured 179 people. A hundred people are still missing. Health Ministry's Crisis Centre head Rustam Pakaya said through a text message.

He said it was difficult to establish exactly how many people had been killed because some residents of the Cireudeu and Ciputat sub-districts had the same name.



This combo shows the general views of the Sydney Harbour Bridge with the lights on (top) and during the "Earth Hour" (bottom) in Sydney yesterday. The waters of Sydney Harbour plunged into darkness at 8:30pm local time, with the iconic Opera House and Harbour Bridge switching off their lights in a global call for action on climate change.

Australia kicks off Earth Hour climate campaign

AFP, Sydney

The waters of Sydney Harbour plunged into darkness yesterday night, with the iconic Opera House and Harbour Bridge killing their lights for an hour in a global call for swift action on climate change.

Chatham Island, the largest of a tiny group of Pacific islands 800 kilometres (500 miles) southeast of New Zealand, officially began Earth Hour by switching off its diesel generators at 0645 GMT, or 8:30pm local time.

The 25-hour energy-saving marathon officially began in Sydney shortly after 0930 GMT with a spectacular switch to darkness for an hour before spreading across the world for more than 80 countries to take part at 8:30 pm local time.

Millions in the harbourside city appeared to observe the hour without light to mark Earth Hour, a global grassroots movement that began in

Sydney two years ago, when 2.2 million people switched off their lights.

It has since grown to include 3,929 cities, villages and localities across the globe.

"It is a very positive, hopeful campaign," Andy Ridley, the event's director, told reporters in Sydney.

"We want people to think, even if it is for an hour, what they can do to lower their carbon footprint and take that beyond the hour."

Thousands lined the harbour for a rare glimpse of blacked-out Sydney, while the centre of Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city, came to life with a pedal-powered concert and others enjoyed moonlit picnics and barbecues.

Some 371 landmarks will power down the world over including the Vatican, Niagara Falls, the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, the Las Vegas casino strip, the Acropolis and Beijing's "Bird's Nest" Olympic stadium.



American volunteers help to brace a retaining wall holding back floodwater from reaching the ground level of Brian Witthoff's home Friday in Moorhead, Minnesota. The Red River is expected to continue rising until Saturday evening when a crest of 42 to 43 feet is expected.

Ctg crisis

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The government plans to supply 10 million cubic feet of gas per day to the business capital of Chittagong and the remaining 5 million cubic feet will be added to the national pipeline, sources said.

Officials said they expect to raise the production to 20 million cubic feet of gas per day soon afterwards.

The government is also thinking of setting up some production units and mills in the area to ease unemployment in Khagrachhari, Petropanga chairman Jalal Ahmed said.

Energy Secretary Md Mohsin also said work on gas pipeline will begin once all official and legal processes have been completed.

Managing Director of Apex Amad Uddin said the company is continuing work and research to ensure the smooth flow of gas to Chittagong city, which lies some 70 kilometres away.

At present, Chittagong city has a demand of 350-360 million cubic feet of gas per day. Of this, Bakhram Gas authority supplies 210 to 220 million cubic feet while 50 million cubic feet comes from Sanghu Gas field, while the national pipeline supplies some more.

Earlier, in February,

Industry Minister Dilip Barua visited the gas field area. At the time he had noted that the work at industries in Chittagong was being hampered due to the gas crisis, and promised that the government has taken an initiative to extract gas from Srimutong gas field.

SEUMTANG GAS FIELD The British company Shell and Pakistan Petroleum Ltd jointly carried out the exploration of gas in 22 acres of the area in 1963, discovering the field at Juggachhola, Semutang area under Manikchhari upazila in Khagrachhari. Five wells were dug here at the time.

Both teams experimentally extracted gas and oil from the field in 1969. But the collapse of a well put a stop to work here at the time. The then Pakistan government resumed work in 1970 but that was also stopped.

In 1983, the government took initiatives to go into production but work was stopped again when the Shantibhumi abducted two British engineers working there.

The Bangladesh mission in Kuwait also remains without any ambassador since April 3 last year, while Rear Admiral M Rahim, appointed as the ambassador to Libya, is yet to join the post that fell vacant on March 23, 2007.

The post of high commissioner in Kuala Lumpur remains vacant since March 1

Additional Foreign Secretary Maj (retd) Khairuzzaman, an accused in the jail killing case. The High Court acquitted him on January 13.

The authorities also decided to reinstate Gen Abu Rushd Rokonuddoula, earlier appointed as the ambassador to Myanmar, to his post in the army.

Besides, Humayun Kabir, Bangladesh ambassador to the USA and Maruf Zaman, ambassador to Vietnam, have been called back to Dhaka on emergency basis in mid-February.

Bangladesh's permanent representative in New York, Ismat Jahan, has also been called back and might be posted to Brussels, sources said.

The post of Bangladesh's permanent representative in Tehran since February 25 after the then ambassador to Iran Shamim Ahsan was transferred to Brussels.

The Bangladesh mission in Athens is yet to get an ambassador.

The new Bangladesh mission in Athens is yet to get an ambassador.

High Commissioner in London Shafiq U Ahmed went

on LPR on November 4 last year, leaving the post vacant since then.

Meanwhile, the tenure of Bangladesh Ambassador to Bhutan AKM Atiqur Rahman will expire on July 15 while the post of Bangladesh high commissioner to India will fall vacant on May 14 as the present high commissioner Liakat Ali Chowdhury is scheduled to go on LPR on that day.

Md Saiful Amin Khan, the Bangladesh ambassador to Spain, will go on LPR on May 31 leaving the post vacant while the tenure of high commissioner to Pakistan, Yasmin Morshed, appointed on a two-year contract, ends on November 30.

The post of Bangladesh ambassador to Japan will also fall vacant in October.

When contacted, Foreign Secretary Touhid Hossain told The Daily Star that the posts fell vacant at the end of the tenure of the immediate-past caretaker government, which wanted the next political government to make the appointments.

"This is very usual. There is nothing to do research on it," he said.

The process of filling the vacant posts has already started and it will be done as usual, Touhid said. "There is nothing to hurry," he added.

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