

US troops in Afghanistan won't be sent to Pakistan

End of drone strikes in Pakistan unlikely in near future

AP, ANI, Camp Leatherneck/ Lahore

There are no plans to deploy US ground troops to Pakistan, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said yesterday, despite concerns over increasing violence between Pakistani troops and Taliban militants.

Speaking to about 300 Marines at Camp Leatherneck in southern Afghanistan on Thursday, Gates assured them that they wouldn't be fighting in the neighbouring sovereign nation.

During a 12-minute question-and-answer session in sweltering heat, Gates told a sergeant he didn't have to "worry about" Pakistan.

Pakistan's military continued fighting Taliban guerrillas in the Swat Valley on Thursday. On Wednesday, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari appealed to President Barack Obama for more help reversing the extension of Taliban-held territory to within 60 miles of the capital, Islamabad.

Brig. Gen. John Nicholson, the top US commander in southern Afghanistan, told reporters that he expects to see an

increase of violence in Afghanistan between now and elections this fall.

"This will be a spike, not an upward slope," he said, because as US-led forces try to secure areas, insurgents are going to try to push back.

More than 60,000 US troops will be stationed in Afghanistan by fall, up from about 38,000 now. The Pentagon has estimated it will deploy about 68,000 troops to Afghanistan for the length of the US combat mission.

Nicholson said the US is looking at three factors to see if its efforts in Afghanistan are working: better security over a period of time, an increase in Afghan security forces and a decrease in poppy cultivation.

Gates also told the Marines that the Pentagon was working on getting troops more time at home between deployments in battle zones.

Meanwhile, while Pakistan has been continuously objecting to the US-led drone targeting of the extremists in the lawless tribal areas along the Afghan border, it is highly unlikely that the United States would suspend the missile strikes

any time soon, as they have resulted in sanitizing several top Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives.

A weekly report by the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), Islamabad, stated that the Obama Administration considers the drone strikes a very successful tool to counter the terror threat, so it is unlikely that the strikes would be suspended in the near future.

The report said that the US, jubilant by the success of its unmanned Predator aircrafts, is considering using Reaper, which is a more advanced and deadlier version of the Predator.

It also quoted a former chief-of-staff of the US Air Force (USAF), General Michael Moseley, as saying that the USAF has now moved to a true hunter role with the Reaper.

The report added that Pakistan's concerns on Reaper operations along the Afghan border and adjacent areas were likely to remain a source of abrasion between Pakistan and the US-led coalition forces operating in the region, The Daily Times reported.

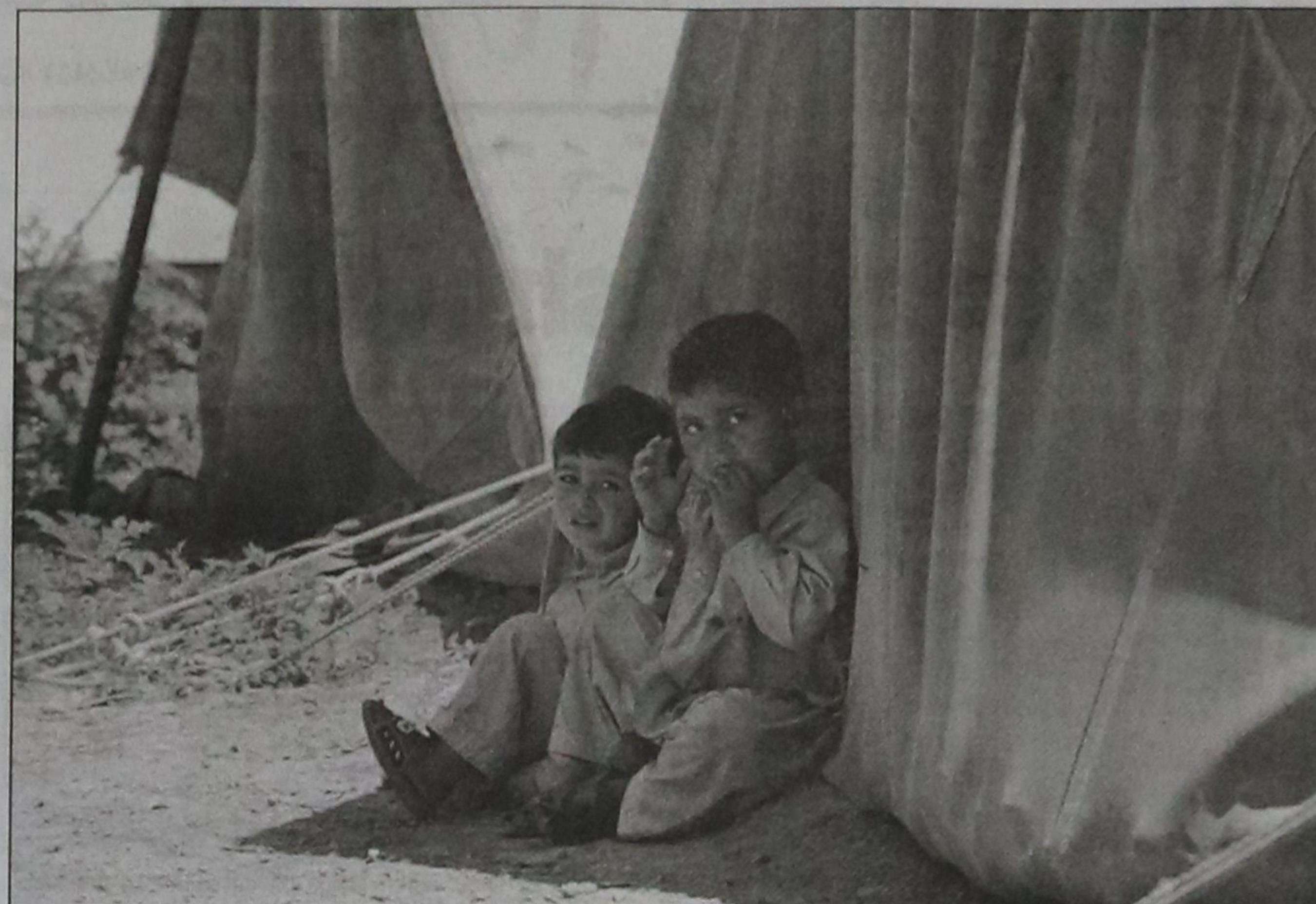


PHOTO: AFP
Internally displaced children, fleeing from military operations against Taliban militants in Buner and Lower Dir, sit next to a tent at a makeshift camp in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani attack helicopters and warplanes blasted suspected Taliban hideouts as aid workers warned against a worsening humanitarian crisis.

Newspapers, cable TV services shut down in Swat

ANI, Peshawar

The prevailing precarious security conditions in the Swat Valley have forced media houses to suspend publication and distribution of news papers in the valley.

Due to the curfew imposed by the security authorities following their offensive against the extremists, distribution of newspapers being published elsewhere in the country have also been stopped in the region, the Daily Times reports.

All Swat-based newspapers have suspended operation as the security situation is extremely dangerous. There is a curfew and free movement of our staff is impossible," editor of a local daily, Ghulam Farooq said.

Cable television services have also been hampered due to irregular electricity supply.

Pak humanitarian crisis intensifying: ICRC

Son of Swat peace deal signatory killed

AFP, Islamabad/ Peshawar

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned Thursday that a humanitarian crisis was intensifying in northwest Pakistan, where thousands have fled fighting between militants and troops.

The government in North West Frontier Province has said up to half a million could flee the Taliban flashpoint district of Swat and local officials said Wednesday that more than 40,000 left the main town of Mingora in 24 hours.

"The humanitarian crisis in NWFP is intensifying," the ICRC said in a statement, adding it no longer had access to the areas most affected by the conflict and that precise statistics of the displaced were so far unverifiable.

"We can no longer reach the areas most affected by the fighting on account of the volatile situation," Benno Kochner, who runs ICRC operations in NWFP from the provincial capital Peshawar, said in the statement.

The ICRC and the Pakistan Red Crescent Society are currently marshalling their resources to be able to provide 120,000 internally displaced people, affected by the fighting, with food and essential relief items, "it said.

The ICRC said it hopes to provide basic

health care for about 30,000 displaced people and that a 60-bed surgical hospital in Peshawar was "scaling up its capacity" to be able to receive up to 100 wounded patients at a time.

Pascal Cuttat, head of the ICRC delegation in Islamabad, urged parties to the conflict "to comply with international humanitarian law -- in particular to take all feasible precautions to minimise civilian casualties".

Before fresh fighting erupted last week, the ICRC was already assisting up to 100,000 displaced people in NWFP and Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal areas, which are on the border with war-torn Afghanistan, the organisation said.

Meanwhile, the eldest son of the Islamist cleric who signed a shaky peace deal with the government in northwest Pakistan was killed in a military air strike Thursday, a spokesman for his father said.

Maulana Kifayatullah, 50 and the eldest of Sufi Mohammad's 12 sons, was killed when war planes bombed an area near the town of Lal Qila, in the northwest district of Lower Dir, spokesman Amer Izzat Khan told AFP.

Kifayatullah had been living in the house of his brother-in-law, who was wounded in the legs but was not in a critical condition, Khan said.

INDIAN POLLS
CEC struggles to find his name in voters' list
CNN-IBN, New Delhi

As Delhi and the NCR voted on Thursday, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Navin Chawla's name was initially missing from the voters' list. It was later found that his name had appeared on another list as he had shifted home after his promotion as CEC.

Chawla along with his wife and daughter exercised their franchise at booth number 86 in Nirman Bhawan that houses government offices and has been turned into a VIP polling station for the elections in the New Delhi constituency.

CNN-IBN's Prarthna Gahlot spoke to the CEC minutes after he cast his vote. Excerpts from the interview:

"Considering four phases are over, do you think on the hindsight it was a right decision to have most of the Naxal states in the first phase of polling?"

Suicide bomber kills 12 in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

A suicide bomber on a motorcycle killed 12 civilians in southern Afghanistan, as police fired Thursday on a crowd of rock-throwing protesters in the west who were angry about civilian deaths they blamed on American bombing runs.

US and Afghan investigators were examining the site of the alleged bombing deaths, but it was unclear how soon they would have a report.

In southern Helmand province, a suicide attacker on a motorcycle set off his explosives Thursday near an international military vehicle in a market area of Gereshk district. The explosion killed 12 people and wounded at least 32 more, said Daud Ahmad, a spokesman for the government for the governor.

Ahmad said he did not have information on whether there were any casualties among the international troops in the vehicle. A spokesman for NATO forces confirmed the incident but said he did not yet have any information on whether there were troop casualties.

In the capital of western Farah province, a protest erupted into a melee outside the governor's office. One protester was wounded by a bullet and five more suffered other injuries after they tried to storm the main government building there, said Gul Ahmad Ayubi, a health department official in the province.

The crowd of about 150 people were protesting the deaths of civilians in the villages of Ganjabad and Gerani, said Belqis Roshan, a provincial council member. The International Red Cross and local officials said the people were killed by American bombs, though the US military said that may not have been the case.



PHOTO: AFP
In this picture taken on May 5, villagers sit near the graves of victims of airstrikes in the village of Garni, in the western Farah province. Angry Afghans shouted "death to America" and hurled stones at government offices yesterday to protest the killing of civilians in US-led air strikes.

Tensions spike as Nato starts Georgia war games

AFP, Tbilisi

Nato kicked off controversial military exercises in ex-Soviet Georgia on Wednesday as tensions spiked in relations with neighbouring Russia over Moscow's expulsion of two alliance diplomats.

Launched a day after Georgia accused Russia of backing a brief military mutiny that allegedly included a plot to assassinate President Mikheil Saakashvili, the exercises have strained ties between the Cold War-era rivals.

Tensions in the region, the scene of a short war between Russia and Georgia last August, were raised further on Wednesday as police clashed with anti-government protesters trying to storm a police building in Tbilisi.

Officials said riot police had used truncheons to repel the protesters as they attempted to climb a fence into the building, but the opposition said police had fired rubber bullets into a crowd of peaceful demonstrators.



PHOTO: AFP
Travellers arrive wearing protective facemasks at Beijing airport yesterday as China started lifting a seven-day quarantine on passengers who had shared a flight from Mexico with a man who later tested positive for swine flu, state media reported.

Flu-hit Mexico gets life back

Millions of kids begin returning to schools

AP, San Miguel Topilejo

As if marshalling for war, Mexico's government mobilised thousands of education officials and parents across the country to swiftly disinfect schools and monitor millions of returning students for signs of swine flu.

High schools and universities open Thursday after a two-week closure intended to curb the spread of the virus. Younger children were ordered back to class on Monday.

Secretary of Public Education Alonso Lujambio called on Mexicans to show "strength of spirit," trying to assuage worries that it's too early to reopen schools after the flu outbreak that killed 42 people in Mexico and sickened more than 1,100.

Parents expressed relief that their children, shuttered

too long in homes, could return to class. But they also worried that the virus could surge back once 40 million young people gather in groups again.

"My 17-year-old daughter is afraid. She knows she must go back but doesn't want to," said Silvia Mendez as she led her 4-year-old son, Enrique, down a narrow street in San Miguel Topilejo, a town perched in forested mountains near the capital.

Mendez and her son wore masks as they walked to the tiny roasted chicken restaurant she owns. Enrique spoke adoringly of his teacher and seemed impatient to get back to kindergarten.

Working parents have struggled to provide childcare during the shutdown. It forced many to stay home from work, bring their youngsters to their jobs, or leave them at home.

KATALYST
Partners in Business Innovation

REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL (RFP)

Katalyst, a market development project under Ministry of Commerce and funded by a consortium of donors, requests proposal from interested consulting firms/team of consultants for the assessment of the Potato sector of Bangladesh, its opportunities and hindrances. The assessment methodology will follow collecting & analyzing of both the primary and secondary data sources. The assignment will include investigation of the following areas-

- Current demand-supply gap, area coverage, trend, varieties grown, and growth potential for both table potato and industrial potato
- Major constraints of the sector specifically for export and processing
- Major national & international markets for fresh and processed potato, specification, potentials and challenges and
- Recommendations for overall sector growth with a time frame

The bidder should have relevant experience in the potato value chain and prior experience in conducting such a study. The proposal should be based on the terms of reference that can be collected by e-mailing to rural.sectors@swisscontact-bd.org along with a brief profile of the consulting firm/ team. Proposal should be submitted by **24 May 2009** to Manager, Rural Sectors Division, Katalyst, House#20, Road#6, Baridhara, Dhaka-1212.