



Local residents flee from Mingora, the capital of Pakistan's troubled Swat valley on Thursday. Attack helicopters and warplanes pounded suspected Taliban hideouts as Pakistan vowed to claim victory after the deadliest fighting to grip the northwest district of Swat in months.

American friends welcome to help better ties with India: Zardari

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari says he hopes to build better relations with India after its parliamentary elections and "if our American friends can help us, they're welcome to."

"I know they are busy at the moment. Democracies are always willing to work with democracies," Zardari told reporters after a meeting Thursday with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee along with his Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

"I'm hoping for better relations. And if our American friends can help us in doing so, they're welcome to," he said.

In an interview Tuesday

with CNN, Zardari had said that Pakistan wanted peace with India.

"Democracies have never gone to war. No Pakistan democratic government has gone to war with India. We've always wanted peace. We still want peace with India," he said.

"I'm waiting for the (Indian general) elections to be over so that all of this rhetoric is over and I can start a fresh dialogue with the Indian government," he told CNN.

Zardari said Pakistan also wanted a commercial relationship with India. "We want a commercial relationship with them. I'm looking at the markets of India for the industrialists of Pakistan and hoping to do the same."



US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates takes questions from the press at Forward Operating Base Airborne in Wardak Province yesterday. The United States and other countries helping to fight Islamist extremists "don't dare" neglect Afghanistan, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said, wrapping up a short visit.

Afghan war costs to overtake Iraq in 2010: Pentagon

AFP, Washington

The cost of fighting the war in Afghanistan will overtake that of the Iraq conflict for the first time in 2010, Pentagon budget documents showed Thursday.

On top of the basic defence budget of \$53.7 billion dollars, the White House is requesting a further \$130 billion dollars for overseas missions, including \$65 billion for Afghanistan and \$1 billion for Iraq.

"This request is where you're going to first see the

swing of not only dollars or resources, but combat capability, from the Iraqi theatre into the Afghan theatre," Navy Vice Admiral Steve Stanley, director of force structure for the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters.

Some 136,000 US troops are currently stationed in Iraq, but they are set to be progressively withdrawn by the end of 2011, in accordance with a security pact signed between Washington and Baghdad in late 2008.

"This request is where

Four British soldiers killed in Afghanistan

AFP, London

The Ministry of Defence announced yesterday the death of three more British soldiers in southern Afghanistan, bringing the total to four killed in one day.

The latest fatalities, in three separate incidents on Thursday, included a member of the 2nd Battalion The Rifles, killed in an explosion when travelling in a Jackal armoured vehicle near Sangin, in Helmand Province, said an MoD statement.

"The latest fatalities, in three

rugged mountainous terrain and difficult politically to wage battle against fellow Muslims, particularly if civilian casualties soar.

Pakistan has a conventional standing army of around 700,000 troops and traditionally considers India its main threat. The military press wing says 100,000 are deployed on the western front in the border areas with Afghanistan.

It remained unclear whether large numbers of troops based in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh, on the Indian border, would be diverted to what

President Asif Ali Zardari has called a fight until a return to "normalcy."

A senior military official, who wished to remain anonymous, told AFP that the security forces were adapting to the new

challenge, which Washington has branded a danger to the very existence of the nuclear-armed state.

"It is true that for a conventional threat, a conventional force was prepared, but the army has full capability to analyse the threat and adapt itself to deal with the changing threat," he said.

"A lot has changed in terms of the army's orientation towards fighting militancy, mostly in the northwest region, and they are now better trained and equipped to meet the challenge."

Analysts recognised that it would be a bloody war, but said the root of success lay with the political authorities moving in when the battle was done.

"There is going to be a lot of bloodshed," said defence analyst Talat Masood, a former army general.

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1m people now displaced in northwest Pakistan: UN

AP, Geneva/Mingora

The UN refugee agency says half a million people have fled fighting in northwestern Pakistan in the past few days, bringing the total displaced in recent months to 1 million.

A spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees says the fighting has led to massive displacement in the area.

Ron Redmond says up to 200,000 people have arrived in safe areas in the past few days and that another 300,000 are on the move or about to flee.

Redmond told reporters in Geneva on Friday that the numbers are in addition to 555,000 already counted by the UN since August.

Earlier Pakistani jets screamed over a Taliban-controlled town Friday and bombed suspected militant positions as desperate residents appealed for a pause in the fighting so they could escape.

More than 45,000 people have fled the operation in the northwestern Swat Valley and surrounding districts that followed

strong US pressure on nuclear-armed Pakistan to fight back against militants advancing toward the capital as a now-defunct peace deal crumbled.

Pakistan has launched at least a dozen operations in the border region in recent years, but most ended inconclusively and after massive destruction and significant civilian deaths. It remains a haven for al-Qaeda and Taliban militants, foreign governments say.

To end one of those protracted offensives, the government signed a peace accord in Swat that provided for Islamic law in the region. But that deal began unravelling last month when Swat Taliban fighters moved into Buner, a neighbouring district just 100km from Islamabad.

Pakistan's prime minister appealed for international assistance late Thursday for the growing refugee crisis and vowed to defeat the militants in the latest operation.

"I appeal to the people of Pakistan to support the government and army at this crucial time," Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani said in a television address. "We

pledge to eliminate the elements who have destroyed the peace and calm of the nation and wanted to take Pakistan hostage at gunpoint."

The military hailed signs of the public's mood shifting against the Taliban after the militants used the peace deal to regroup and advance.

"The public have seen their real face," Maj. Gen Athar Abbas said. "They realize their agenda goes much beyond Shariah (Islamic) courts. They have a design to expand."

Still, the pro-Western government will face a stiff task to keep a sceptical nation behind its security forces. The exodus from Swat adds to the more than 500,000 already displaced by fighting elsewhere in Pakistan's volatile border region with Afghanistan.

Military operations are taking place in three districts that stretch over some 400 square miles (1,000 square kilometres). Much of the fighting has been in the Swat Valley's main city of Mingora, a militant hub that was home to around 360,000 people before the insurgency two years ago.

Pakistan's maritime area increases by 50,000km after UN nod

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan has increased its maritime area to over 50,000 kilometres, the Daily Times reports.

Pakistan Science and Technology Minister Azam Khan Swati said following the UN Commission on the Limit of Continental Shelf's (UNCLCS) green signal, the country's maritime area has increased substantially, and this would help in providing a reliable database for future marine research.

"It will also provide a good basis for scientists and technicians to further promote and develop marine geological and geophysical research," Swati said.

US senator pledges urgent aid to stabilise Pakistan

AFP, Washington

A key US senator on Thursday pledged quick action on a giant aid package to stabilise Pakistan as a committee cleared an early one billion dollars to support the insurgency-hit US ally.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Afghan President Hamid Karzai warned of urgent challenges in a luncheon with members of the US Senate a day after a three-way summit with President Barack Obama.

Obama has pledged a new focus on fighting Taliban and al-Qaeda extremists in the region. His special envoy, Richard Holbrooke, said the three nations would hold another meeting after Afghanistan's presidential election in August.

Senator John Kerry, head of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Richard Lugar, the ranking member of the minority Republicans, spoke with the leaders about their bill to triple civilian US aid to Pakistan to 7.5 billion dollars over the next five years.

"Obviously, it is urgent," Kerry told reporters afterward.

"Senators on both sides -- Republicans and

Democrats -- are committed to move this as rapidly as possible," Kerr said.

Shortly after the meeting, a key committee of the House of Representatives cleared an initial one billion dollars for Pakistan as part of an emergency spending package to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The money approved by the House Appropriations Committee includes 400 million dollars to help build up Pakistani forces' counterinsurgency abilities amid a major offensive in the troubled Swat Valley.

It also includes another 600 million dollars in economic development aid to improve education and boost democratic reforms in Pakistan, where Zardari's civilian government last year ended nearly a decade of military rule.

But the longer-term aid package to Pakistan is the subject of hot debate between the two chambers of Congress.

Some House members are pushing to attach conditions to the US aid, saying Pakistan must show accountability. Leading senators support a set of benchmarks to gauge progress but not trigger an automatic cut-off in aid.



Senate Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) (C) fields questions from reporters while flanked by Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai (L) and Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari (R) on Capitol Hill Thursday in Washington, DC. President Karzai and President Asif Ali Zardari were guests at a luncheon at the Capitol.

Giant US military base emerges in Afghan 'desert of death'

AFP, Camp Leatherneck

In the forbidding Afghan desert, US engineers are carving out a sprawling military camp as part of a dramatic American troop build-up designed to confront Taliban insurgents.

The desolate plain in southern Helmand province that Afghans call the "desert of death" has turned into a hive of frenetic activity, underscoring President Barack Obama's decision to expand the US military commitment to the war.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates flew into Camp Leatherneck on Thursday to get a first-hand look as dozens of bulldozers kicked up clouds of dust and soldiers swung hammers in searing heat.

Some of the newly arrived soldiers at the camp told Gates they were still waiting for radios and other equipment to arrive.

Gates promised to look into the problem and said later at a news conference in Kabul that moving such a large number of troops and so much equipment was a "logistical challenge" in a country with a shortage of airports and major roads.

Every day military planes ferry in more marines and soldiers to the camp that has emerged out of the desert seemingly overnight, protected by miles of sand walls topped with barbed wire along with rows of barrier walls.

25 dead as typhoon hits Philippines

AFP, Baguio

At least 25 people were killed and thousands displaced overnight as Typhoon Chan-hom raked the northern Philippines, officials said yesterday.

The typhoon blew out into the Philippine Sea off the northeast coast of Luzon island early Friday after unleashing landslides, floods, and power cuts across the north of the country.

Among the worst-hit areas was the mountain town of Kiangan and nearby areas that were devastated by landslides, and the cape of Bolinao on the South China Sea coast that bore the full force of its landfall late Thursday.

"Bolinao -- well frankly speaking it's devastated," Defence Secretary Gilberto Teodoro told reporters in Manila after a helicopter overflight of the coastal region swamped with floods and littered with downed pylons.

Chan-hom killed 12 people in Bolinao and nearby towns, where strong winds knocked down houses, trees and electric posts, he added.



Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah speaks during an interview with AFP at his residence in Srinagar on May 6.

Bhopal victims lobby US Congress for action

AFP, Washington

Victims of the 1984 gas leak that killed thousands of people in Bhopal, India took their battle Thursday to the US Congress, seeking pressure on Dow Chemicals.

Three Bhopal residents spent the week lobbying lawmakers, urging them to hold a hearing on the world's deadliest industrial accident ahead of its 25th anniversary in December.

According to the Court's order, additional sessions judge P R Patel has been designated to conduct the trial in the Godhra train carnage case, which will be held in the premises of the Sabarmati Central Jail here.

Judge S H Vora and additional sessions judge Jyotsna Yagnik will be presiding over the trial of Naroda Gam and Naroda Patiyacases respectively.

For the Gulburg society case, where Congress ex-MP Ehsan Jaffery was killed during the riots, Judge B U Joshi has been designated as judge for the special court.

For the two cases in Mehsana district -- Dipda Darwaja and Sardarpura -- the Court has designated Judge B N Kariya and Judge S C Srivastava respectively.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Pakistan needs hearts, minds to defeat Taliban

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan may have superior military might, but to win the war against Taliban guerrillas they must avoid collateral damage and rebuild angry lives shattered by the offensive, analysts say.

Militants are believed to have a strong presence in more than half North West Frontier Province, despite military operations over