

15 more die as Pak military continues anti-Taliban drive

Zardari appeals for international help to avert human catastrophe

AFP, PESHAWAR, RAWALPINDI

Eleven militants and four soldiers were killed during the last 24 hours as the Pakistan military continued its air and ground offensive against the Taliban in its northwest, military sources said.

Pakistan fighter jets and attack helicopters pounded Taliban targets in the northwest as President Asif Ali Zardari yesterday called for global help to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.

Zardari held talks with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in New York, where he appealed for global aid for the displaced.

"We're appealing to the world, myself and the secretary general... to draw attention to the human catastrophe that is taking place," he told reporters.

Ban expressed "deep concern" about the humanitarian situation in the area, where the UN refugee agency said 501,496 stranded people had registered with authorities since May 2.

The death toll announced by the government yesterday was the lowest single day toll since the military launched an offensive in Swat last week. It is impossible to confirm such tolls

independently, which add up to more than 750 dead militants over the last 17 days in the northwest.

But it "Four soldiers embraced shahadat (martyrdom) and 12 security force personnel were also injured during encounters," a military statement said.

The military also said five beheaded bodies were found in various places around Mingora. That was also impossible to confirm but at least one resident told AFP from a refugee camp further south that he had seen corpses in Mingora.

It is difficult for reliable and independent information on developments to filter across the frontlines, as many local journalists have reportedly fled the region.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's army chief General Ashfaq Kayani yesterday ordered his troops to minimise civilian casualties even if they had to take risks while battling Taliban militants in the northwest.

He also directed "precision strikes" in the offensive that has already displaced hundreds of thousands of people from the Taliban-held Swat valley and adjoining areas since May 8, officials said.

Thousands of thousands of civilians have fled the punishing offensive in the

Swat valley, escaping Taliban fighters who have terrorised the population in a bloody campaign to enforce sharia law and expand their control.

Terrified residents trapped in Mingora, the district's main town, told AFP by telephone that militants had planted mines and were digging trenches.

"People are becoming mentally ill, our senses have shut down, children and woman are crying, please tell the government to pull us out of here," said one shopkeeper contacted by AFP who did not want to give his name.

"Just imagine how we are surviving. Forget the lack of electricity and other problems, the Taliban are everywhere and heavy exchanges of fire are routine at night," the man said.

Air strikes targeted Taliban bastions across Swat, which has sunk from a stunning ski resort favoured by Westerners to a crucible of Taliban violence, where ground troops have yet to take control.

Helicopter gunships also swung into action in the neighbouring district of Lower Dir, where the military has been on the offensive since April 26 after Taliban fighters advanced to within 100 kilometres of Islamabad.



Pakistani residents walk over the rubble of a local police force post destroyed by Taliban militants in troubled Malakand district yesterday. Pakistan fighter jets and attack helicopters pounded Taliban targets in the northwest as President Asif Ali Zardari called for global help to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.

Trucks torched at Pak Nato terminal

AP, Peshawar

Suspected Taliban militants stormed a depot in northwest Pakistan that handles supplies for Nato troops in neighbouring Afghanistan yesterday and torched eight trucks, police said.

Elsewhere in the region, the Pakistani army battled militants in an offensive that has sent hundreds of thousands fleeing.

Attacks on terminals and trucks rolling through the Khyber Pass toward Afghanistan have intensified since last year, adding to concern that more regions along the Afghan border are slipping from government control and into the hands of Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai warned yesterday that the threat militants pose to both countries was very real.

"Terrorists and extremists are extending their reach in whole areas of our countries," Karzai told a regional economic conference in the capital, Islamabad.

The depot attack saw dozens of militants pour into the transport terminal near the northwest city of Peshawar and set the trucks ablaze before fleeing, police official Ghafoor Khan Afridi said. Most of the terminals have few if any guards.

Firefighters quickly doused the flames, and metal shipping containers holding Nato supplies were unscathed, he said.

Nato and US commanders say their losses from the attacks have been minimal and pose no threat to their expanding military operation in Afghanistan. Still, they have begun seeking alternative routes through Central Asia.

Bomb kills seven, wounds 21 in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

A suicide bomb attack killed seven people and wounded 21 yesterday outside a US military base in the same part of eastern Afghanistan where militants stormed government buildings a day earlier, police said.

The militant attacks in Khost, a city within sight of the tumultuous border with Pakistan, comes as the US makes leadership changes in Afghanistan that demonstrate a clear break from Bush-era appointees.

A vehicle drove up to the first gate outside Camp Salerno, on the edge of Khost city, early Wednesday morning and exploded, said Wazir Pacha, a police spokesman for Khost province. Seven people were killed and 21 others were wounded, the Interior Ministry said in a statement.

US forces confirmed the attack, saying four Afghan security guards were killed in the blast and 12 wounded.

There were no casualties among international troops, said Lt. Cmdr. Christine Sidenstricker, a US military spokeswoman.

On Tuesday, 11 Taliban suicide bombers struck government buildings in Khost city, sparking running gunbattles with US and Afghan forces that killed 20 people and wounded three Americans.

A Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, claimed

that 30 suicide bombers had attacked the government buildings.

Teams of Taliban militants have launched multipronged assaults on government centers in Kabul, Kandahar and Helmand's capital in the last year, demonstrating an increasing sophistication in their attacks. Military analysts say such attacks are a result of training by Pakistani militants and al-Qaeda fighters.

In another example of multidirectional attacks, militants fired several rockets at two other US military bases in eastern Paktika province early Tuesday, the US military said in a statement.

Six militants were killed when US troops used artillery and airstrikes to fire back, the statement said. It said two people not involved in the fight were also killed and four others were wounded.

"We are investigating these actions to determine what happened in Paktika," said Col Greg Julian, spokesman for the US forces. "We take the safety of Afghan civilians very seriously and sincerely regret this loss of life."

President Barack Obama has taken charge of the increasingly bloody eight-year war this week, replacing the general in charge of the effort and installing a new ambassador.

Nuke power deal inked

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As per the understanding, Russia will supply Bangladesh with nuclear materials and provide services in the field of nuclear fuel cycle in accordance with national legislations of the two states and international treaties to which both Bangladesh and Russia are parties.

The MoU also includes terms for cooperation in education, training, updating skills of administration, scientific and technical persons and radioactive waste management.

The MoU signing is the result of a fruitful negotiation between officials of Bangladesh and Russia in early April. State Minister for Science and ICT Yafes Osman said, "Bangladesh and Russia moved one step ahead regarding cooperation in nuclear technology."

Talking to reporters after the signing ceremony, he said, "We have also signed such MoUs with USA and China. Now we will assess them and opt for the one that will be best for Bangladesh and its citizens."

The main point of the MoU is building more confidence between the two nations for peaceful use of nuclear energy in Bangladesh, he added.

Asked if Bangladesh will choose Russia for setting up the nuclear power plant, he later told The Daily Star, "Let us see who is coming with what proposals."

A Bangladeshi delegation will soon visit Russia to see nuclear power plants there.

About the cost and fund of such plants in Bangladesh, Yafes said the MoU is a very preliminary step and more discussions are needed to resolve crucial issues like managing funds. He expressed hope that the fund for the proposed nuclear power plant would not be a big problem.

would set up a 600-1000MW power plant at Rooppur to resolve the country's electricity crisis.

The Rooppur Nuclear Power Project was conceived in the early 1960s and 260 acres of land was acquired for it.

Spasskiy said neither technology nor financing would be a problem to set up nuclear power plants in Bangladesh. "Our technologies are the best in the world and we will offer a very competitive proposal to Bangladesh for installing plants," he told reporters.

"It is an important moment. We have signed the MoU which enables us to start working and practical cooperation on both sides about matter of interests and define the areas of cooperation," he said, adding that the governments of both the countries will now decide the matter. "The prospect of the cooperation is in the designing and afterwards in the building of the first ever energy nuclear reactor in your country. It will also imply a radical change to the situation of electricity in your country," Spasskiy said.

Describing Bangladesh as "not only a longstanding friend but also a strategic partner," he said, "I hope both the countries will proceed to the signature of a final agreement as soon as possible."

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had approved the draft of the MoU last week.

Energy Adviser to the Prime Minister Towfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, Law Secretary Habibul Awal, senior officials of the science and ICT ministry and Russian Ambassador in Dhaka GP Trotsenko were present at the MoU signing ceremony.

MM Meyer, director (fund) of Russia World, and N Averkiev, Department of International Cooperation of Rosatom were the two other members of the Russian experts team.

War crime case

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the plaintiffs to the court seeking withdrawal of the case, said the government already initiated steps to try war criminals under the International Crimes (Tribunal) Act 1973 by setting up special tribunals, and the plaintiffs considered the government efforts reasonable.

According to the international crimes act, upon conviction of a war criminal, the tribunal is supposed to sentence the convicted to any punishment proportionate to the gravity of the crime as appears to the tribunal to be just and proper, including death.

Talking to reporters, Deluar said the government high ups instructed him to take necessary steps for withdrawal of the case filed by three lawyers on November 13 last year against Ghulam Azam and the 35 others, following the filing of which a Dhaka court on Monday summoned the defendants to appear before it, to explain why they should not be declared war criminals.

"The government might have faced difficulties to initiate trials of the 36 defendants on charges of war crimes if this case continued," Deluar said yesterday.

State Minister for Law Advocate Qamrul Islam also expressed satisfaction over the

withdrawal of the case.

"I'm happy and thank the plaintiffs as they withdrew the case keeping their confidence in the government's move to hold trials of war criminals," he told reporters in his instant reaction.

The state minister, who earlier on several occasions requested victims of 1971 not to file cases against war criminals since the government itself will be a party to holding the long due trials, also said yesterday that the public confusion about trials of war crimes will be ameliorated by the withdrawal of the suit.

He was referring to the public confusion created by filing of war crime cases by private citizens while the government is taking its time to do so, although it has been saying that it will try the war criminals and mete out exemplary punishment.

Reiterating the government's strong position for holding war crime trials, the state minister said the trial process will start soon, and all war criminals will be brought to justice gradually.

The state minister hoped that trials of top war criminals will be completed by December this year.

He also expressed astonishment over how a civil court took the case into cognisance and

NEWS ANALYSIS

Rival coalitions upbeat as voting ends in India

ANN, New Delhi

The curtains closed on India's month-long national election yesterday - widely regarded as too close to call - with voters having chosen the last 86 members of India's 543-seat Lower House of Parliament.

Formal campaigning ended at 5pm on Monday in the five-stage poll, which has seen a record 8,070 candidates in the fray, as opposed to 5,435 contestants in the 2004 polls.

Of the nearly 714 million people eligible to cast ballots, 100 million are first-time

voters. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of the Congress Party and the leader of the opposition Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Lal Krishna Advani - leaders of rival coalitions - are both scrambling for allies since no single party is expected to win the minimum 272 seats needed to form a national government on its own.

"We will form the next government, I have no doubt about it," Dr Singh said in a speech. "Politics is the art of the possible. Anyone can be mollified."

Nine states, including parts of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, were involved in the final round. But southern Tamil Nadu, which sends 39 MPs to New Delhi, is the key battleground state today - where Dr Singh's Congress and its regional ally DMK are fighting with their backs to the wall against resurgent opposition leader Jayalithaa Jayaram.

The former film actress, who heads the regional AIADMK party, has drawn huge crowds throughout the state. The 85-year-old DMK Chief Minister Muthuvel Karunanidhi has been in poor health.

The showing in the state could well have an impact on the final outcome of the polls, when results are announced on Saturday.

The Congress-DMK alli-

ance swept the state in 2004, making DMK one of the most powerful coalition allies of the Singh government at the centre and bagging several key Cabinet posts. This time, pundits say, the alliance would be lucky to win 20 seats.

There is speculation that if Jayalithaa turns in a specially strong performance, Congress may ditch its current ally to team up with her.

With Congress support shoring up DMK's control over the state assembly as well, any such realignment may lead to fresh state assembly polls in Tamil Nadu - which are otherwise not due until 2011.

Most analysts agree that India's 15th general election is by far the most tightly regulated.

Besides being required to keep a daily account of expenses, candidates need written permission for every poster pasted on a household wall and had to comply with strictly enforced campaigning hours.

"The Election Commission is one of the few institutions that gained credibility, power and stature over the past two decades," says political scientist Yogendra Yadav, an expert on elections.

The commission also banned exit polls during the five-stage voting process, which makes it tough to know which way the wind is blowing.



Voters queue to cast their votes at a polling station in Ropar, in the northern state of Punjab yesterday. Indian voters cast their final ballots in the country's marathon elections, with analysts predicting a shaky coalition government that will struggle to survive a full term.

Children, who?

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"All the laws have put us in an anomalous situation in which we cannot even define who is a child. And it shows the governments have been very much negligent in protecting the rights of the children," says legal expert Prof Mizanur Rahman of Dhaka University.

Laws styled the Convention on Rights of the Child, the Children Act, the Factory Act, and the Mines Act define someone as a child under the age of 18, 16, 15 and 12 respectively, whereas international laws including the UN and ILO conventions define anyone under 18 as children.

Even 38 years after independence the government could not formulate a comprehensive law in this regard. The government even could not adopt a national policy to address the problems related to child labour.

As a result, child labour has gone unabated in the country resulting in 7.4 million working children including 3.2 million labourers, according to a survey titled "National Child Labour Survey: 2002-2003."

The existing laws have left the children exposed to hazardous work as none of those has categorised diverse forms of work children are engaged in the country under different circumstances.

The laws even don't define hazardous forms of work children are doing in Bangladesh under these circumstances.

categorise diverse forms of child labour including the worst forms -- slavery, forced labour, engagement of child in pornography and any work harmful to their health, safety and ideology, and working in unhygienic atmosphere producing materials, sound and vibration harmful to them.

In fact, there is no separate law concerning child labour and only the Labour Law, 2006 incorporates a chapter styled "Appointment of Juvenile Labourer" with reference to child labour.

The chapter does not define child labour and its various forms specifically, making only some vague and generalised statements like "adolescents cannot be employed at any institution or profession."

Though the law mentions adolescents can't be employed in any institutions in work, it states: "Whatever be in this chapter, children of 12 can be employed in light work which is not dangerous for their health and growth or will not hamper their education."

The only legislation formulated specifically focusing on children is the Children Act, 1974 which basically deals with juvenile and justice.

Although the government signed and ratified several international conventions and laws since 1994, it did not ensure full implementation of any of those including the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999.

None of the laws even attempts to fix or suggest a minimum wage standard for the children, thrusting upon them exploitation by the factory owners.

Legal experts criticise the existing laws saying those are inappropriate, sector-oriented and contradictory. They also recommend some immediate amendment to the existing laws.

"The laws are never comprehensive to address all the issues related to children," says Prof Mizanur Rahman Khan.

"The punishment mentioned in the laws related to children is very low and ultimately all the laws are anti-child and pro-reach, at least in respect of child labour," Prof Khan adds.

"The laws formulated so far on child labour are related to children's involvement in formal sector work with informal sector remaining beyond their purview. As most of the children work in the informal sector, child labour cannot be stopped without taking into account the children involved in this sector," he observes.

Around 93 percent of the working children work in the informal sector and of them, around 5.7 million work in the rural and around 1.2 million in the urban informal sector.

The survey reveals further neglect by the government in this regard as 33 percent of the total 75 percent children attending schools are labourers, most of who join the workforce as soon as they complete primary education.