

Taliban call for boycott of Afghan election

AFP, Kandahar

Afghanistan's Taliban movement yesterday ordered voters to boycott August elections and wage holy war to "free" the country from Western troops, raising the stakes in their lethal insurgency.

The latest in a surge of attacks killed eight Afghan soldiers and guards, raising concern that insecurity will see poor voter turnout and jeopardise the legitimacy of the August 20 presidential and provincial polls.

In a statement released to the media, the militia ordered its fighters to block all roads on the eve of what is only the second presidential ballot in Afghan history, in order to stop voters from going to polling stations.

"All Afghans, in line with their Afghan and Islamic principles, must boycott this deceiving American process," said the statement, charging that the elections were intended to distract attention from US war-time failures.

"To achieve real independence instead

of going to fake election centres, they must go to jihad trenches, and through resistance and jihad (holy war) they must free their invaded country from the invaders," it said.

It called for attacks on "enemy centres", understood to refer mainly to bases of Western and Afghan forces who are allied in battle against the Taliban-led insurgency that peaked this year with record attacks.

The Taliban did not, however, directly order strikes on voting centres, according to an e-mailed copy of the Pashtu-language statement seen by AFP.

Mujahedin (holy fighters) "must launch operations against enemy centres," said the statement from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the self-styled name of the 1996-2001 Taliban regime, which was overthrown by US-led troops.

"They must prevent people from attending the elections and one day before the elections all roads and highways must be totally closed to govern-

ment and civilian vehicles, and they must inform people," it said.

The Taliban have previously called for a boycott of the polls, a landmark in the US and Nato-led drive to move Afghanistan towards democracy after decades of war, but this was their most inflammatory statement so far before the vote.

The militia regularly calls for "jihad" against the government and the US-dominated military forces backing the administration.

Anyone who took part in the elections, when people will vote for a head of state and provincial councillors, would be seen as an ally of the "occupying forces". The militia has previously killed people on such allegations.

Thursday's statement was released two days after the top UN official in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, urged the Taliban not to disrupt the elections and acknowledged there were "significant" security concerns.



US Marines take position as they help Afghan National Army search compounds for insurgents in Gharnsir district in Helmand Province on Wednesday.

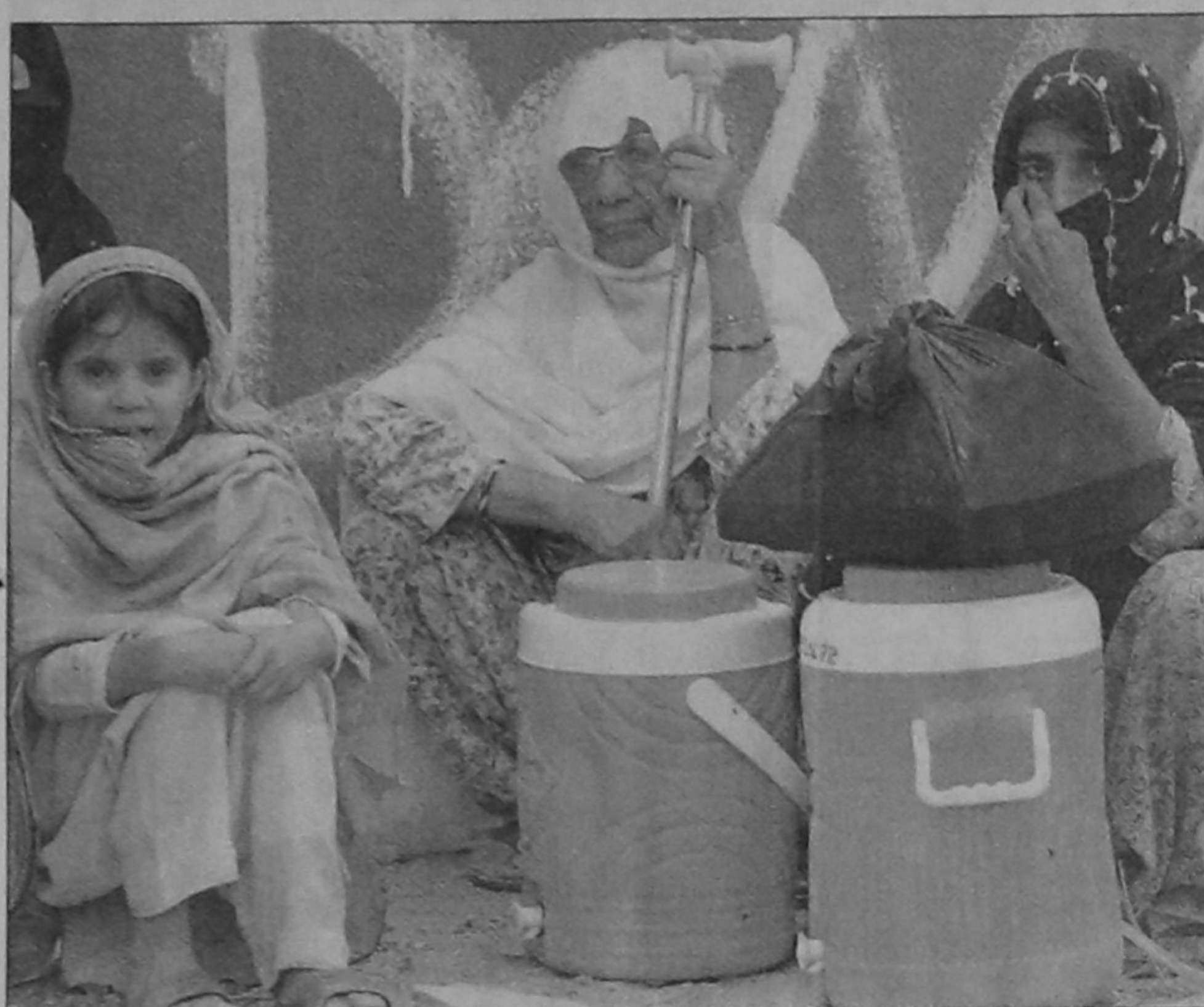


PHOTO: AFP

A displaced family waits for transport to return home from a camp in Karachi yesterday. Around 600,000 out of an estimated 2.2 million people displaced by fighting between government troops and Taliban militia across the northwest have returned home, a UN spokeswoman told a news conference.

One million Pakistani children face threat to education: UN

AFP, Islamabad

The United Nations warned Thursday that one million children could have their education interrupted in Pakistan, where conflict with the Taliban has damaged or turned schools into civilian shelters.

Around 600,000 out of an estimated 2.2 million people displaced by fighting between government troops and Taliban militia across the northwest have returned home, a UN spokeswoman told a news conference.

"It is encouraging that some 600,000 people have returned but we are still looking at a very large number who have not," said Stephanie Bunker.

Pakistan has been returning families to northwestern districts Swat and Buner, where troops unleashed a massive summer offensive against the Taliban. Commanders say they

have largely defeated the extremists.

Schools used as a temporary refuge for the displaced are scheduled to re-open for the new academic year on September 1, but getting all children back into education "poses a massive challenge," the UN warned.

"According to official sources, 187 schools are destroyed, 318 schools are partially damaged -- 313 of them schools for girls," said a UN statement.

"Schools being used as shelters must be repaired and equipped... while for IDP (internally displaced person) children returning to their places of origin, temporary structures... will be needed."

"If not, an estimated one million children could face interruptions to their education," the UN statement added.

North Korea seizes South's fishing boat

AP, Seoul

North Korea seized a fishing boat from the South on Thursday after it accidentally strayed into the North's waters, officials said, amid tensions on the peninsula over Pyongyang's nuclear programme.

Seoul asked the North to quickly release the vessel and the four crew members, a Unification Ministry spokeswoman said.

Early Thursday morning, a North Korean patrol boat took the 29-ton vessel "800 Yeonan" into custody after it crossed into the North's eastern waters apparently because its satellite navigation system malfunctioned, an official at South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

The official, who spoke on customary condition of anonymity, said the boat was taken to North Korea's eastern port of Jangjin, just north of the border.

In the wake of the seizure, dozens of demonstrators gathered in central Seoul to denounce the North. Some burned a North Korean flag and

a photo of the country's leader Kim Jong Il and one believed to be of his third son, Kim Jong Un, who has come under intense media scrutiny in recent months as a possible successor. Some protesters carried signs calling for the immediate release of the fishing boat and crew.

The Unification Ministry, which is responsible for handling relations with the North, made a formal written request to North Korea's maritime authorities asking for the boat's release, spokeswoman Lee Jong-joo said.

North Korea confirmed it had received the request and said by telephone that it would look into the matter, Lee said. North Korea's state news agency, monitored in Seoul, did not mention the seizure.

Relations between the two Koreas deteriorated last year after a pro-US, conservative government took office in Seoul, advocating a tougher policy on the North. In retaliation, Pyongyang cut off ties and halted all major joint projects except a joint industrial complex located just across the border in North Korea.

News in Brief

'Queen Mother' of India dies

AFP, New Delhi

One of the last queens of India, Maharani Gayatri Devi, who was feted as an international style icon and spent time in jail after she became a politician, died on Wednesday, her family doctor said.

Devi, who was 90, married the Maharaja of Jaipur in 1939, becoming a member of the royal family that effectively ruled the city of Jaipur and the surrounding area of Rajasthan state.

Four killed in blast at Iraqi party office

AFP, Baquba

Four people were killed and eight wounded on Thursday in a bomb attack on the offices of a Sunni political party in a restive city northeast of Baghdad, police said.

"Four people, including a woman, were killed and eight were wounded in an explosion inside the headquarters of the Reform and Development party in Baquba," police Colonel Hamid al-Shammari told AFP.

Hackers break into MI5's website

ANI, London

Computer hackers have invaded MI5's official website, it emerged last night.

According to the Daily Express, the gang rigged the site so the identity of visitors could be stolen and viruses downloaded on to their machines.

Russia launches 6 foreign satellites

AFP, Moscow

Russia fired six foreign satellite into orbit Wednesday, from the Baikonur space centre in Kazakhstan, Russian military spokesman Alexander Vovk said, according to the Interfax news agency.

Six satellites, namely the DubaiSat-1, Deimos 1, UK-DMC 2, Nanosat 1B, AprizeSat 3, AprizeSat 4 were put in orbit by the Russian launcher Dnepr, Vovk said. The rocket was launched at 10:46 pm Moscow time (18:46 GMT), he added.

Court declines sedition case against Musharraf

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan's top court yesterday turned down a request to launch a treason case against ex-military ruler Pervez Musharraf, while the former president failed to show up and explain his 2007 imposition of emergency rule for a second day of hearings.

The court sessions have jolted the Pakistani political establishment at a time of relative calm and just as the US wants it to focus on eradicating militancy that threatens the Afghan war effort next door.

Petitioner Hamid Khan, a lawyer, wanted the Supreme Court to order the registration of the treason case. Possible punishments for high treason in Pakistan include death.

Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry rejected the petition, saying the parliament was the proper

venue to debate the merits of Musharraf's actions, which also included firing dozens of judges including Chaudhry himself.

Last week, the high court summoned Musharraf, or his lawyer, to appear this week to explain his 2007 actions.

Neither Musharraf nor a representative showed up Wednesday or Thursday. Musharraf lives in London and he has said his actions were in the interest of Pakistan.

Musharraf seized power in a bloodless 1999 military coup. He made Pakistan a key US ally following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks that sparked the American-led invasion of neighbouring Afghanistan.

In early 2007, Musharraf fired Chaudhry. It triggered street protests led by lawyers, damaging Musharraf's popularity. Musharraf's party lost elections in 2008 that further eroded his grip on power.

Pakistan hands over proof of India's 'covert links' with Mehsud to US, Nato

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan has reportedly handed over evidence of India's involvement in providing aid to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) chief Baitullah Mehsud to the United States and Nato.

Sources said during the US Special Envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke's recent visit to Islamabad, top military and political leaders gave certain documented and video tape evidence to him.

They said evidence of New Delhi's involvement in aiding Mehsud were also provided to US commander of International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) in Afghanistan, Lt. General Stanley McChrystal.

Sources said that Pakistan had provided enough evidence to prove "India's covert links with

Baitullah Mehsud and provision of aid to him through Indian consulate in Afghanistan."

Pakistan's political and military leadership also urged Holbrooke to discuss the issue with India saying Mehsud did not have the resources to counter the military's extensive offensive against him, Onlinenews.com reports.

Officials also expressed their reservations regarding the continuous US drone strikes in tribal areas inside Pakistan's geographical territory.

According to sources, Islamabad told US in clear terms that it has certain apprehensions regarding the missile strikes targeting Mehsud directly. They said the attack must be halted immediately as it has resulted in more civilian casualties.

Pakistan opens new front against Taliban

Success of Swat offensive still 'unclear', says Holbrooke

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, ANI, Islamabad/Lahore

Pakistani security forces have opened a new battleground against the Taliban in the country's Ashrafi Dara area in North West Frontier Province (NWFP), a media report said yesterday.

The authorities have also clamped an indefinite curfew Wednesday in Almas and Palaran areas, in the Upper Dir district of the NWFP. The Nation newspaper reported on its website.

Seven houses of the militants, including the house of militant commander Bakht Jahan, were set on fire, while three militants were captured in the overnight clashes, the report said.

However, the curfew in

Maidan tehsil in lower Dir district as well as many areas in the Swat Valley, such as Mingora, Fizatag and Shangla, among others, has been relaxed Thursday morning.

Earlier Pakistan Intelligence agencies have warned that the Taliban could target oil depots, grid stations, railway tracks and river bridges in Punjab.

According to a notification issued by the provincial Home Department, the Taliban has already dispatched a teenage suicide bomber to target government buildings and other important installations in the province.

The Interior Ministry has directed security agencies to beef up security in and around all important loca-

tions. Security has been put on high-alert across the region following the threat.

Meanwhile, raising questions over the success of the Swat military offensive, US Special Envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke has said it is unclear whether the Taliban has really been hit hard in the operation.

Talking to media persons after returning from his visit to Pakistan and Afghanistan here, Holbrooke said Washington is yet to ascertain whether scores of Taliban insurgents are actually being killed, as claimed by the Pakistan Army, or have they been "scattered away only to recoil later."



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of the ruling National Conference (NC) shout slogans during a protest against Kashmir's main opposition party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Srinagar yesterday. The main opposition in Kashmir on Wednesday demanded a judicial probe into the allegations that the region's top elected official was involved in a sex scandal.

We have to deliver what we promised

Sonia tells Congress MPs

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

With only a week to go before the first parliament session of the new government ends, Congress chief Sonia Gandhi exhorted party members not to lose sight of the reason they had been elected as MPs.

In a well calibrated address at the Congress parliamentary meeting, she cautioned and chided while stressing that the time had come 'to deliver what we promised'.

Sonia, who backed Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's declaration there was no dilution of the national consensus on countering terrorism emanating from Pakistan, reminded the MPs to not forget the decisive mandate that had voted the government back to power.

"You will be soon going back to your constituencies and states. I am sure you will keep in touch with your constituency and attend to the needs and

demands of the people there," she said.

"As I said on an earlier occasion, we have been given a decisive mandate and people expect us to fulfil their aspirations. It is for us now to deliver what we have promised."

"We now have a larger number of ministers from our own party. I am speaking from my personal experience which I know you will share, when I say that the expectations and demands from constituents are ever increasing and rightly so," Sonia said.

"It is no longer a matter of a hand pump here and there, or a culvert or a kutcha (unpaved) road. People demand better infrastructure, all-weather roads, functioning schools and hospitals, skill-training facilities and jobs."

Sonia asked all ministers to take out time to assist MPs, especially in developmental works in their respective constituencies.



Request for Expressions of Interest For conducting an in-depth qualitative study to capture changes in business media due to Katalyst Interventions

Since 2003 Katalyst has achieved significant jobs and income impact by increasing the competitiveness of micro, small and medium sized enterprises in selected urban and rural sectors.

Katalyst has been working in the media sector with the goal of increasing coverage of small and medium enterprise (SME) issues in media outlets. Katalyst invites Expressions of Interest from organizations interested in conducting in-depth qualitative studies, determining changes which have occurred in business media as a result of Katalyst interventions. Intervention areas included activities to:

- increase the skills of local journalists
- increase business coverage in print and broadcast media
- introduce business journalism courses in public and private universities
- support broadcast media channels and media houses to develop business programs
- facilitate the formation of Business Reporter's Network (BRN) and exchange program between journalists and local businesses

For further information regarding the study, please contact the Monitoring and Impact Assessment (M&I) Group Manager at 8861416 (Ext 254). Interested firms are requested to send in their "Expression of Interest" elaborating their expertise and suitability for this assignment. Applications should be addressed to the Group Director, M&I Group, Katalyst, House 20, Road 6, Baridhara, Dhaka. Requests should be submitted by Aug 6 2009. Only short listed candidates will be notified of a meeting to discuss methodology and terms of reference.