



French soldiers are seen speaking with Afghan villagers during an operation in Tagab district in Afghanistan's Kapisa province in a photo taken on July 27. It was the first Nato patrol in months in a part of Kapisa province where the alliance has security responsibility.

1,000 Afghan civilians killed this year: UN

AFP, AP, Kabul

Afghanistan's intensifying conflict killed more than 1,000 civilians in the first six months of 2009, an increase of nearly a quarter over the same period last year, the United Nations said yesterday.

This year has been the bloodiest in a Taliban-led insurgency that has drawn thousands of international military reinforcements, most of them deploying into areas where a strong militant presence could prevent August 20 elections.

The boost in troop numbers -- now roughly 90,000 -- was one reason for the higher toll of 1,013 dead civilians, according to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) Human Rights Unit.

The UN said Friday the number of civilians killed in conflict in Afghanistan has jumped 24 percent so far this year, with bombings by insurgent and airstrikes by international forces the

biggest single killers.

In a grim assessment of the first half of 2009, the UN assistance mission in Afghanistan said the Taliban and other anti-government militants have become more deadly by shifting from ambush attacks to suicide bombings, roadside explosives and targeted assassinations.

Nearly 60 percent of the civilian deaths so far this year were caused by insurgents, 30 percent by pro-government military forces and the rest unattributable to any party to the conflict.

The same period last year saw 818 civilians killed in insurgency-linked violence. In the first six months of 2007, 684 were killed -- 41 percent by security forces and 46 percent by militants, it said in a report.

The armed conflict intensified significantly throughout Afghanistan in 2008 and in the first six months of 2009, with a corresponding rise in civilian casualties and a significant erosion of humanitarian

space," the unit said.

Reasons for the surge in violence were increased military operations in civilian areas, more complex insurgent attacks and a crackdown on extremists in neighbouring Pakistan that forced fighters into Afghanistan.

Militant activity was also sustained during the winter, unlike in previous years when there had been a lull in fighting, it said.

Almost a third of Afghanistan was now directly affected by insurgent activities with civilians bearing the brunt of the fighting, it added.

"In addition to the sharp increase in civilian deaths, vulnerable groups are also suffering in terms of destruction of vital infrastructure, loss of income and earning opportunities, and deterioration of access to essential services."

Most civilians were killed by insurgent bombs, called improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide attacks, the report said.

Musharraf unlikely to face trial anytime soon

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani lawyers called Thursday for Pervez Musharraf to face trial despite the country's top judge appearing to rule out initiating a case of treason against the former military ruler.

The Supreme Court, headed by recently reinstated Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, is listening to an investigation into Musharraf's imposition of emergency rule that saw dozens of judges sacked two years ago.

The court said notice had been issued for Musharraf to appear in person or through a lawyer, but the ex-president ignored the summons -- attending neither in person nor through counsel at sessions on Wednesday and Thursday.

Chaudhry was reinstated in March by Musharraf's successor and rival President Asif Ali Zardari, who was forced to execute an embarrassing climbdown and bow to public opinion and restore the judges after weeks of chaos.

"He (Musharraf) suspended the constitution and the judiciary. All steps he took were to keep himself in power," senior lawyer Hamid Khan told the court.

"All his actions should be declared null and void, and he should be declared a usurper," he said.

Fellow senior lawyer Akram Sheikh asked the court to refer its investigation of general Musharraf to Pakistan's powerful army for court martial.

"Musharraf did not appear in court. Therefore until new proceedings start against him, Musharraf's case should be referred to the army. He should be tried under army law," he said, telling AFP that would mean a court martial.

"They are demanding Musharraf's trial under article six of the constitution, which relates to 'abrogation or subversion' of the constitution and calls for him to face trial for 'high treason'," senior lawyer Khawaja Haris told AFP.

Myanmar should free Suu Kyi, says US

AFP, Washington

The United States on Thursday renewed its call for Myanmar's military regime to free democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi on the eve of a verdict in which she could receive five years in prison.

"We believe that she should be immediately and unconditionally released, along with the 2,100 other political prisoners in Burma," State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said, using Myanmar's former name.

Kelly said that a US embassy consular officer was present during her trial, in which a US citizen is also facing prison over a bizarre incident in which he swam to Aung San Suu Kyi's lakeside home.

Myanmar prosecutors charge that Aung San Suu Kyi broke the terms of her house arrest by sheltering the American man, John Yettaw, who said he was trying to tell the Nobel Peace laureate of his vision that she would be assassinated.

Critics say the trial is a ploy by the regime to keep Aung San Suu Kyi locked up until after elections scheduled for 2010. She has already spent almost 14 of the last 20 years in detention.



Myanmar residents of Japan attend a rally to demand the release of democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in front of the Myanmar Embassy in Tokyo yesterday. A Myanmar court has postponed its verdict in the internationally condemned trial of Suu Kyi until August 11, adding to uncertainty over the ruling junta's plans for the democracy icon.



From left: Presidents of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari, Tajikistan Emomali Rakhmonov, Russia Dmitry Medvedev and Afghanistan Hamid Karzai shake hands during their meeting in Dushanbe yesterday. The Russian leader arrived in Tajikistan for a working visit on his way to Kyrgyzstan to attend an informal Commonwealth of Independent States summit.

Presidents meet for security summit in Tajikistan

AFP, Dushanbe

The presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia and Tajikistan met in the Tajik capital Dushanbe Thursday for an unusual security summit amid growing concerns about Islamic militancy.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are both fighting bloody insurgencies led by Islamic militants while Tajikistan is concerned that the instability will spill over its border with Afghanistan.

Russia, meanwhile, is keen to sharpen its profile in Afghanistan and Pakistan, two countries where it has had only a limited role to play since the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Pakistan's Asif Ali Zardari, Russia's Dmitry Medvedev and Emomali Rakhmonov met at the Tajik president's residence and urged an intensified fight against drug trafficking in the region.

Their joint statement issued after the talks expressed concern about the increase in trade in narcotics as one of the main sources of financing for militancy in the region.

It called on the international community to take "additional steps for a decisive fight against the narco-threat."

Moscow is also concerned about the increasingly independently-minded behaviour of Rakhmonov and Russia will keen that Tajikistan does not follow moves by other ex-Soviet states to dilute Russian influence.

The Kommersant newspaper reported Thursday that Tajikistan wanted Russia to start paying for a military base it maintains in the country and to pull out Russian border guards stationed on Tajik territory.

Medvedev's top foreign policy aide Sergei Prikhodko also said ahead of the trip that Moscow was concerned that moves by Rakhmonov to promote Tajik -- a dialect of Persian -- were not at the expense of the status of Russian.

Medvedev also held bilateral talks with his Pakistani counterpart Asif Ali Zardari and boasted that bilateral trade had been growing despite the economic crisis, television pictures showed.

Moscow has a history of tricky relations with Islamabad which contrasts with its traditionally warm ties with Pakistan's rival India.

Tajikistan, which shares a porous 1,600 kilometre (995-mile) border with Afghanistan, has been battling militants suspected of having fled security operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan in its remote eastern mountains.

More US drones to target Taliban in Afghan war

AFP, Washington

The US military plans to use more drone aircraft to target Taliban militants in Afghanistan while focusing less on hunting down al-Qaeda figures, the Los Angeles Times reported on Thursday.

Although defeating the al-Qaeda terror network remains an overriding goal for Washington, officials now believe the best way to pursue that objective is to ensure stability in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan instead of al-Qaeda manhunts, the paper said, citing US government and Defence Department officials.

It was more important to prevent a slide towards violence and anarchy that could be exploited by al-Qaeda, which used Afghanistan to stage its attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, the officials said.

"We might still be too focused on Bin Laden," an official told the Times. "We should probably reassess our priorities."

The shift in priorities for the drone fleet comes despite President Barack Obama's declaration that defeating and dismantling al-Qaeda is the primary goal of his strategy for the Afghan war.

Eight drones that have been devoted to tracking al-Qaeda in remote Afghan mountains will be transferred to the fight against insurgents, the paper said.

And the US Central Command plans to send about 12 more drones to the Afghan front, including some aircraft that have been assigned to Iraq -- a move resisted by US commanders there.

The drones are in high demand and the military faces difficult choices in deciding how best to deploy the aircraft, which are in short supply.

'No evidence' Laden in Pakistan Says Islamabad

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's civilian government reiterated Thursday it had "no evidence" that al-Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden was in the nuclear-armed Muslim country, as Washington has charged.

"al-Qaeda and Taliban have threatened Pakistan, attacked our security forces, killing innocent civilians and targeted our leadership," said Information Minister Qamar Zaman Kaira in a statement. "We are therefore combating terrorism in our own interest. We do not want our efforts to be undermined by hypothetical assumptions," he added.

The statement from his office said there "is no evidence that Osama bin Laden is present in Pakistan" and that "those making claims of his presence in the country should provide valid proof of it."

Last week, a US counterterrorism official told AFP one of bin Laden's sons "may be dead" following reports he was likely killed by a US missile strike in Pakistan earlier this year.

It was unclear whether Saad bin Laden was close to the location of his father, who is believed to be hiding in the rugged mountainous tribal belt along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, when he died.

The last audio message said to be from Osama bin Laden and released by al-Qaeda was aired in June on Al-Jazeera when he accused US President Barack Obama of following George W. Bush's policy in "antagonizing Muslims."

Trials for riot suspects set for August

By G. J. Bai



Photo taken from the English language China Daily newspaper on Friday in Beijing shows photographs released by Urumqi police of 15 suspects still at large, under the heading "Wanted in Urumqi". Trials of suspects involved in deadly July unrest that shook the capital of China's Xinjiang region are slated to begin in mid-August, state press said.

China delivers warship to Pakistan

AFP, Karachi

China yesterday delivered the first of four state-of-the-art frigates commissioned by nuclear-armed Pakistan from top ally Beijing, a naval spokesman said.

"The first F-22P Frigate constructed for the Pakistan navy at the Hudong Zhonghua Shipyard in Shanghai was delivered to Pakistan on Thursday," said Lieutenant Commander Shakeel Ahmed.

In keeping with contracts signed between China and Pakistan in 2005, the frigates will be equipped with anti-submarine helicopters, surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles and other defence systems.

"The F-22P frigates will not only enhance the war fighting potential of the Pakistan navy but will also strengthen the indigenous ship-building capability of the country," said Ahmed.

'British govt did not do enough for troops'

AFP, London

The British government did not do enough to support frontline troops in the first years of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the defence minister said in an interview published yesterday.

Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth said service personnel had been justified in their anger at a lack of interest in their efforts, from both the government and the wider public, in the early stages of the conflicts.

But Ainsworth also told the Daily Telegraph that improvements had been made over the last two years to recognise and support the armed

services. "People were pretty cheesed off with the attitude not only of the government, but of the British public," he said.

"They (troops) were out there in Iraq, they were out there in Afghanistan, they were doing hard yards and putting their lives on the line -- and nobody back here was nearly as interested as they ought to have been."

The comments come after the Ministry of Defence confirmed Thursday that troops in Afghanistan had suffered their highest casualty rate since the US-led invasion of the country in 2001, in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

Fauna play key role in circulating seas

Bio-power in the oceans

Animals could be the third force driving sea currents, says new study released Wednesday

Study

Analysis of water displaced by jellyfish

Researchers recorded video of jellyfish swimming through dye

Showed that they pulled water through as they moved

Marine animals could generate about 1 trillion watts of power

The warm wake -- equaling waves and tides

Known forces acting on the oceans

Wind

Tides

Source: Physical Geography (2009) 3(1) 21

AFP, Paris

Creatures large and small may play an unsuspectedly important role in the stirring of ocean waters, according to a study released Wednesday.

So-called ocean mixing entails the transfer of cold and warm waters between the equator and poles, as well as between the icy, nutrient-rich depths and the sun-soaked top layer.

It plays a crucial part in marine biodiversity and, scientists now suspect, in maintaining Earth's climate.

The notion that fish and other sea swimmers might somehow contribute significantly to currents as they moved forward was first proposed in the mid-1950s by Charles Darwin, grandson of the legendary evolutionary biologist of the same name.

But this was dismissed by modern scientists as a fishy story.

In 1960s, experiments compared the wake turbulence created by sea creatures with overall ocean turbulence. They showed that the whirls kicked up by microscopic plankton or even fish quickly dissipated in dense, viscous water.

On this evidence, sea creatures seemed to contribute nothing to ocean mixing. The clear conclusion was that the only drivers of note were shifting winds and tides, tied to the gravitational tug-of-war within our Solar System.

But the new study, published in the British science journal Nature, goes a long way toward rehabilitating the 20th century Darwin, and uses the quiet pulse of the jellyfish to prove the case.