

Handout photograph shows US envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke (L) is holding a meeting with Pakistani former premier Nawaz Sharif and other party leaders in Islamabad yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US praises Pakistan's anti-Taliban progress

18 militants killed in Swat revenge attacks

AP, AFP, Islamabad

President Barack Obama's special envoy to Pakistan praised the country's "very significant" progress in taking back key territory from the Taliban and promised more weapons for the fight against extremists close to the Afghan border.

Richard Holbrooke began an official visit Sunday, his first since the reported death of the militants' leader, Baitullah Mehsud, in a CIA missile strike Aug. 5.

Heavy rain forced him to postpone a trip to the northwestern Swat Valley, where hundreds of thousands of refugees have begun to return after the military declared in July that it had ended Taliban control of the area, a US Embassy official said on condition of anonymity citing policy.

On Sunday, residents in Swat reported finding 18 bullet-ridden bodies lying in the streets, some of them believed to be those of militants loyal to the local Taliban chief.

"Eighteen dead bodies of militants were found in Barikot, Shamoal, Kabal and Kanju," a local military spokesman told AFP.

"They had been apparently shot dead by residents who fear that the Taliban might return. These militants were not killed in any military operation... The heads of some of the bodies had been smashed with hammers."

Atif-ur-Rehman, administrative chief of Swat district, confirmed that 18 bodies had been found but he had no further details.

Holbrooke told reporters traveling with him Saturday that the Pakistani military's success in Swat was a sign of

progress, along with the apparent death of Mehsud, which he described as a serious blow to the militants.

"I cannot tell whether the Taliban have been destroyed or dispersed as a result of this operation until I go myself," he said. "But one thing that is quite obvious is that security forces regained Swat and Buner from the Taliban, which itself is very significant."

Washington has reportedly been anxious for Pakistan to capitalize on the momentum by launching a ground offensive in the Taliban-controlled tribal areas west of Swat including Mehsud's stronghold of Waziristan. However, Holbrooke said the timing was up to the Pakistani military, which has been launching aerial assaults against militant bases near the border.

Threat to Pak nukes 'real' due to greedy politicians

Says German expert

ANI, Warsaw

Pakistan has been claiming that its nuclear weapons are protected with some world class security measures in place, and that there is no fear of them falling into extremists hands, but according to a German expert the threat to Pakistan's nukes is real.

According to Jochen Hippler, a Pakistan expert at the University of Duisburg, it is very hard to keep the nuclear armaments safe, primarily due to the country's incompetent and corrupt political leaders.

Hippler said the Taliban may never succeed to overcome Pakistani military, however it's the greedy politicians because of whom the country will fail.

"The Taliban will never be able to conquer the country militarily. There is no way to do that. But on the other hand, the Pakistani state may just fail because of incompetence, lack of organisation, corruption and because the Pakistani political elite are incredibly incompetent and greedy," Hippler said.

Ahmadinejad to appoint 2 women to his cabinet

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said on Sunday he plans to appoint at least two women ministers to his new cabinet, a first in the Islamic republic.

He said in a live television interview he would propose Fatemeh Ajorlou for the welfare and social security ministry and Marzieh Vahid Dastjerdi for the health ministry.

"There will be some more young people and other women in the cabinet," Ahmadinejad said, adding that he would submit his lineup to the 290-member parliament on Wednesday.

US man departs Myanmar after release from jail

AP, Yangon

The US Embassy says an American man imprisoned for sneaking into the home of Myanmar's democracy leader has been flown out of the country.

John Yettaw, 53, was arrested after swimming to Aung San Suu Kyi's home and staying two days.

The embassy says Yettaw of Falcon, Missouri is headed to Bangkok, Thailand on Sunday on a military plane with US Sen. Jim Webb of Virginia. The senator secured his release Saturday with a plea to Myanmar's ruling junta.

Webb thanked the government for the release of Yettaw at a brief news conference just prior to their departure. He was sentenced last week to seven years at hard labour for breaking the terms of Suu Kyi's house arrest in early May.

Suu Kyi was given 18 months additional house arrest.

Yettaw sentenced to seven years in jail for sneaking into the home of detained Myanmar democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi was handed over to an American consular official on Sunday to be flown out of the country.

A US Embassy car retrieved John Yettaw from the prison where he has been held since early May after he was arrested while swimming away from Suu Kyi's house.

US Sen Jim Webb of Virginia secured Yettaw's release Saturday and the two will fly on a military plane to Bangkok, Thailand later Sunday, according to a statement from the senator's office.

Yettaw and Suu Kyi were both convicted last week of breaking the terms of her house arrest. Suu Kyi, who has been detained for 14 of the last 20 years, was given 18 months additional house arrest. Yettaw, 53, of Falcon, Missouri, was also convicted of an immigration violation and swimming in a restricted zone.

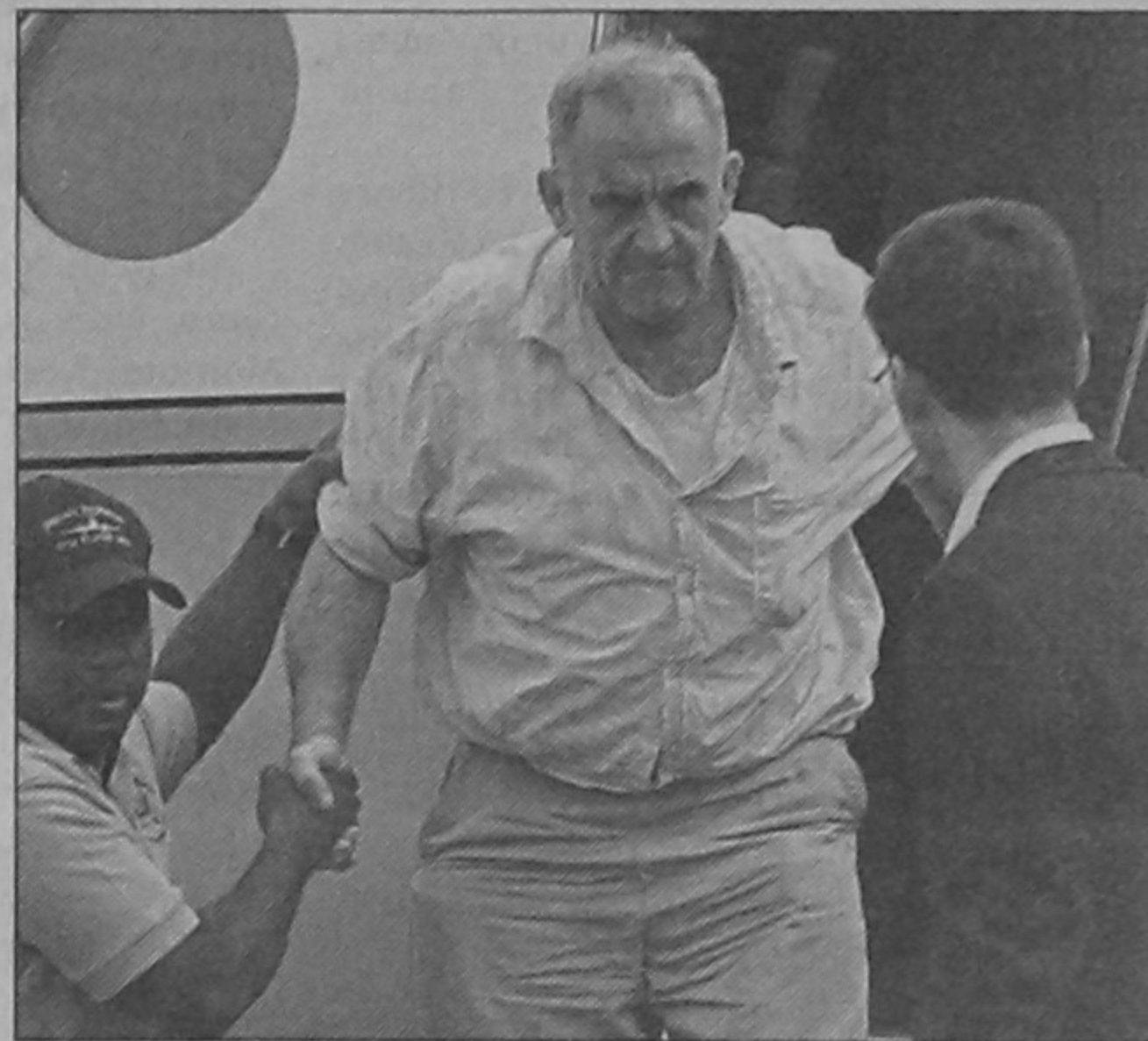


PHOTO: AFP

US citizen John Yettaw (C) is helped off the plane as he arrives at a military airport in Bangkok yesterday following his release from Myanmar prison.

US raises the stakes in war as Afghans vote

AFP, Washington

Afghanistan's elections come at a pivotal moment for the US-led war effort as Washington pours troops and money into an increasingly ambitious mission with no end in sight.

The vote serves in part as a test of US strategy as thousands of troops have moved into the country's volatile south to try to bolster security in the face of rising violence from Taliban insurgents.

A brazen car bombing outside Nato military headquarters in Kabul on Saturday underscored the challenge confronting the Americans, who make up nearly two-thirds of the 100,000-strong coalition force.

Whatever the outcome of the polls, President Barack Obama faces a difficult crossroads amid mounting casualties, growing anxiety within his own party about the war and speculation the top commander in Afghanistan will ask for yet more forces.

"The president is making a practical com-

mitment to Afghanistan that is far greater than that of his predecessor... more troops, more civilians, and more money," said a report from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"As the American footprint grows, so do the costs," it said.

US troop levels are set to reach 68,000 in coming months, more than double the number in place at the start of the year, and analysts predict the head of American and Nato forces, General Stanley McChrystal, will soon issue a request for more troops.

The administration meanwhile is scrambling to find more civilian experts to fix the country's corruption-plagued police and courts while weaning farmers off of the lucrative poppy crop.

With the US mission costing an estimated four billion dollars a month, the war in October will enter its ninth year. And despite the growing international presence, the insurgency's reach has steadily spread.

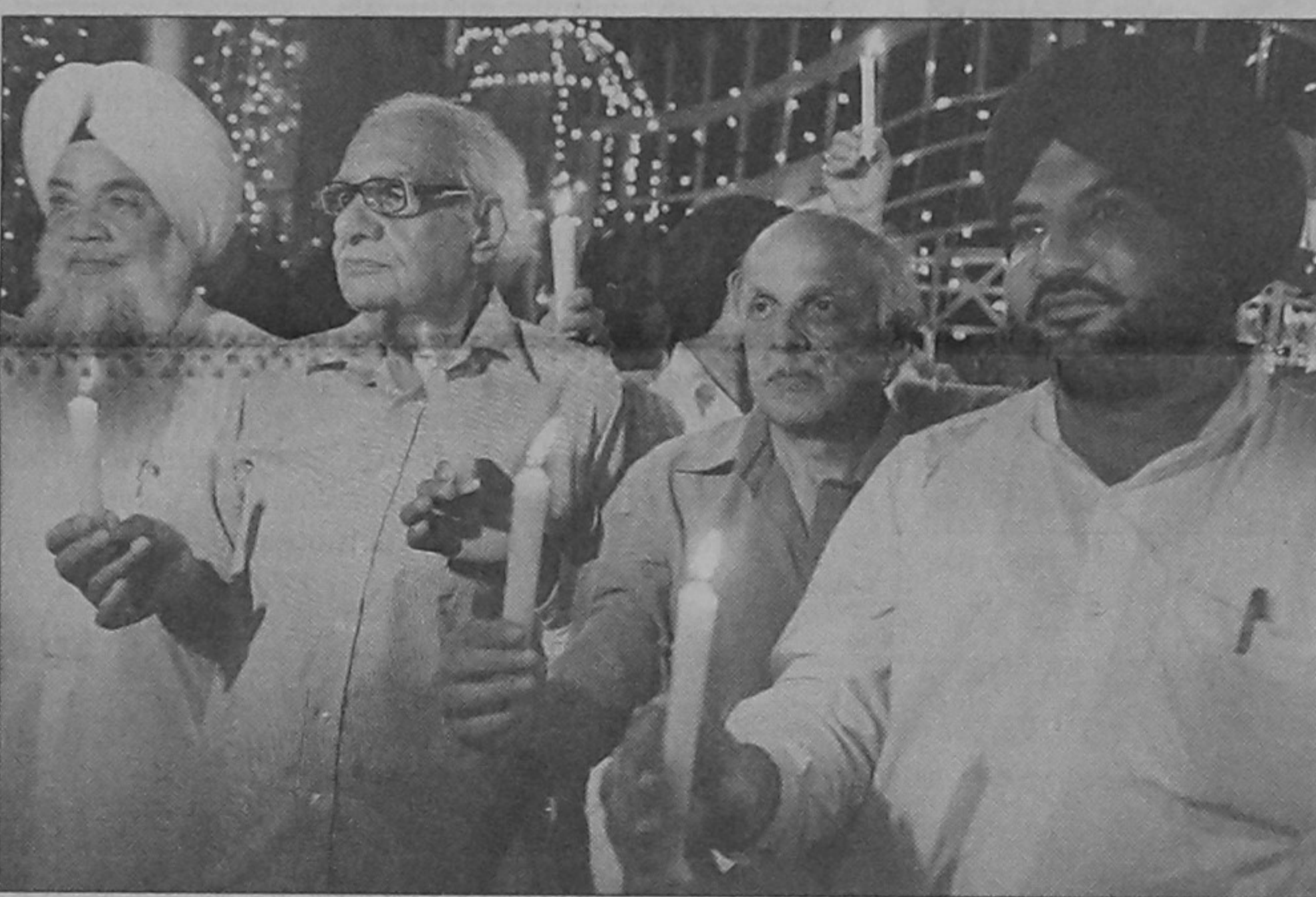


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani and Indian nationals under the banner of Hind-Pak Dost Munch (friendship) and Indian film producer Mahesh Bhat (2nd R) hold a candlelight vigil for peace between their two nations at the Indo-Pak border at Wagah on August 14, on the occasion of independence anniversary celebrations.

Rains flood Lankan war refugee camps

AFP, Colombo

Heavy rains flooded camps housing some of Sri Lanka's 300,000 war refugees, officials said Sunday, raising fears for the welfare of the detainees.

The downpours washed away makeshift shelters, toilets and sewage pipes, and left hundreds of people unable to cook meals in open-air kitchens in the northern district of Vavuniya.

The Tamil civilians remain held in the state-run camps despite the government's victory over the Tamil Tiger separatist rebels in May after decades of ethnic conflict.

Access to the camps for aid agencies has been restricted by the Sri Lankan government, which says it is screening the inmates in search of former Tamil Tigers fighters.

Monsoon rains are due next month, and international aid agencies have repeatedly expressed their concern over the detainees' basic living conditions.

"More than 500 people have been re-located to higher grounds. The government is providing cooked food and other essentials," said Vavuniya's top government official, PS.M. Charles.

PIA plane returns mid-flight to find singer's handbag?

ANI, Rawalpindi

A Lahore-bound flight of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) was reportedly forced to return to the Benazir Bhutto Shaheed International Airport on Saturday after renowned singer Shabnam Majeed claimed to have lost a handbag in the departure lounge.

Sources at the airport told Daily Times that 15 minutes after take-off, the singer informed the flight attendant that she had misplaced her bag. They said the flight crew searched the plane, but were unable to find the missing bag.



PHOTO: AFP

In this photograph taken on August 15, Sri Lankan war displaced people (background) stand in line with buckets to collect water at the Manik Farm camp in the island's northern district of Vavuniya. Heavy rains over the weekend flooded some of the camps housing 300,000 displaced people.

ROBOTS AT WAR

Will humans stay in the loop?

AFP, Washington

Going off to war has always meant risking your life, but a wave of robotic weaponry may be changing that centuries-old truth.

The "pilots" who fly US armed drones over Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan sit with a joystick thousands of miles (kilometres) away, able to pull the trigger without being exposed to danger.

Other robots under development could soon ferry supplies on dangerous routes and fire at enemy tanks.

The explosion in unmanned vehicles offers the seductive possibility of a country waging war without having to put its own soldiers or civilians in the line of fire.

But analysts say the technology raises a host of ethical and legal questions, while political and military leaders have yet to fully grasp its implications.

"What's the effect on our politics? To be able to carry out operations with less human cost makes great sense. It is a great thing, you save

lives," said Peter Singer, author of "Wired for War."

"On the other hand, it may make you more cavalier about the use of force," he told AFP.

Commanders see unmanned vehicles as crucial to gaining the edge in combat and saving soldiers' lives, freeing up troops from what the military calls "dull, dirty and dangerous" tasks.

Cruise missiles and air strikes have already made war a more remote event for the American public.

Now, robots could offer the tantalizing scenario of "pain-free" military action, said Lawrence Korb, a former US assistant secretary of defence.

"That raises the whole larger question -- does it make it too easy to go to war, not just here or anywhere else?" he said.

Robotic technology is taking armies into uncharted territory where tens of thousands of sophisticated robots could eventually be deployed, including unmanned vehicles possibly designed to automatically open fire.



PHOTO: AFP

In this image obtained from the US Marine Corp (USMC), Colonel Ronald J Johnson (L), commanding officer 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, is briefed on the "Dragoneye" unmanned aerial drone at Camp Al Qatranah, Jordan, during Exercise Infinite Moonlight on July 11, 2006. In the US fight against al-Qaeda and its allies in Pakistan's tribal areas, drones armed with lethal missiles are the weapon of choice.

Maoist violence, coastal security to top Indian chief ministers' meet

INDO ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has convened an internal security meeting of chief ministers here Monday, with a concerted strategy to defeat Maoist rebels, the state of coastal security, border management and modernisation of police forces top on the agenda.

The meeting, a follow-up to a similar assembly held in January, is expected to review the steps taken by states for improving both technical and human intelligence, procurement of arms and ammunition, and filling up of vacancies in forces.

The home ministry has already drawn up an elaborate counter-offensive operation in Maoist strongholds across central India where 26,000 personnel drawn from the Central Reserve Police Force, the Border Security Force, and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police will be involved.

The upcoming offensive against the Maoists in seven affected states is timed for a launch in October and the objective is to secure the Maoist belts and then govern.

Manmohan Singh has described Left extremism as the country's biggest internal security challenge and also made a mention in his Independence Day address that the government would "redouble its efforts" to contain the rebels.