



A Pakistani paramilitary soldier stands beside burning Nato oil supply tankers on the outskirts of Quetta on Tuesday. Gunmen in southwest Pakistan set ablaze eight trucks carrying fuel supplies for Nato forces fighting Taliban insurgents in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Drought-hit Indian farmers sell wives to pay debts

AFP, Lucknow

Drought-hit farmers in northern India are resorting to selling their wives to repay debts to local loan sharks, activists say, as one of the weakest monsoons in years takes its toll.

Poverty, poor administration and a lack of education means farmers in the rugged Bundelkhand region are taking extreme steps to pull through a poor rainy season, they say.

"This has been happening for quite some time now, but people were hesitant to come out with all this," said Manoj Kumar, a social activist working with farmers in the area.

Massive vote fraud will hurt Afghanistan

Says Abdullah

AFP, Kabul

Leading challengers for the Afghan presidency claimed massive fraud had compromised elections, raising questions Wednesday about the legitimacy of Hamid Karzai's expected second term in office.

The president has passed the key threshold of an outright majority based on results from more than 90 percent of polling stations, which put the war-torn and corrupt country

on track for another five-year Karzai rule.

Western allies, who have sent more than 100,000 foreign soldiers to fight a Taliban insurgency and support the government, have been withering in their condemnation of fraud during the country's only second presidential election.

Those foreign governments now face increasingly hostile public opposition to the war and questions over record Western fatalities with

no exit in sight.

Karzai's main rival, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah -- trailing the president in the vote count released so far -- said the election commission should suspend the release of results as the figures include fraudulent votes.

"It's illegal what they have been doing and on top of this I think these announcements include hundreds of thousands of fraudulent results," he told AFP of a timetable clearly laid out before the

election.

For the first time, the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) said Tuesday it had found "clear and convincing evidence of fraud".

"I think in two phases you'll see that hundreds or thousands of votes will be discounted or taken out. That's quite likely and that will affect the outcome of the election," Abdullah hit out late Tuesday.

"I think the damage will be unfortunately a lasting one."

Nato defends 'progress' as Afghan criticism mounts

AFP, Brussels

Nato Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen came to the defence Wednesday of efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan, amid mounting criticism of military operations and fraud-tainted elections.

In remarks released by his office, Rasmussen insisted that the fundamentalist Taliban militia could never take power again, and that last month's polls, while flawed, were still a step forward for the country.

"I am concerned that the public discourse on the effort in Afghanistan has started to go in the wrong direction," said Rasmussen, who was due later Wednesday to take part in a Nato ceremony in the United States.

While acknowledged the criticism, he underlined: "We may not be making progress fast enough, but we are making progress."

"The Taliban has no chance of taking power again, nor do terrorists have any safe haven in Afghanistan from which to threaten the world. Afghans are slowly but steadily leading better, freer lives."

"And while the elections have clearly not been close to perfect, in the context, they were still a step forward," he said.

Earlier Wednesday, leading challengers for the Afghan presidency claimed massive fraud had compromised the August 20 polls, raising questions about the legitimacy of Hamid Karzai's expected

second term in office.

The president passed the key threshold of an outright majority based on results from more than 90 percent of polling stations, which put the war-torn and corrupt country on track for five more years of Karzai rule.

Western allies, who have sent more than 100,000 soldiers to fight the Taliban-led insurgency and back the government, have condemned the fraud during Afghanistan's second presidential election.

Those foreign governments are facing increasingly hostile public opposition to the war effort, particularly due to record international fatalities as their troops stepped up combat in July.

N Korea intentionally opened floodgates

Says Seoul

AP, Seoul

South Korea suspects North Korea intentionally flooded a river at their shared border last weekend, a top government official said Wednesday, as rescuers recovered the bodies of a boy and two others engulfed by the surge of water.

North Korea unleashed an estimated 40 million tons of water from a new dam without providing prior notice. Six South Koreans camping and fishing at the river were swept to their deaths.

The North said Monday that it "urgently" ordered the discharge because the reservoir's water level was too high.

Thousands of mud homes swept away in India floods

AFP, Kolkata

Nearly 400,000 people were marooned by flooding in eastern India after torrential rain that killed at least two and washed away thousands of mud houses, officials said yesterday.

Four districts of West Bengal state were hit and dams were struggling to hold back floodwater, state relief minister Mortaza Hossain said.

"All rivers are in spate because of days of lashing rains," he told reporters in Kolkata, the state capital.



Sri Lankan rights activists protest outside Colombo's main railway station yesterday. Rights groups are lobbying the government to release tens of thousands of Tamil people displaced by the war and now held in state-run camps.

Japan's new leaders agree on coalition

AP, Tokyo

Japan's new ruling party will form a coalition government with two smaller groups, despite differences on foreign policy and the presence of US Marines on Okinawa, party officials said yesterday.

The agreement paves the way for Democratic Party of Japan leader Yukio Hatoyama to put together a new Cabinet. Hatoyama is almost certain to become Japan's next prime minister in a parliament vote scheduled for Sept. 16.

The left-of-centre

Democrats won a sweeping victory in elections on Aug. 30 for the 480-seat lower house of parliament, giving them a simple majority. But they need the coalition with the smaller parties to control the less powerful upper house.

Hatoyama's party will align with the Social Democratic Party and People's New Party to replace the outgoing Liberal Democrats, a pro-business and staunchly pro-US party that had governed the country for more than 50 years.

Democratic Party of Japan spokesman Toshiaki Oikawa

said the secretary-general of each party attended talks Wednesday at which they largely worked out their differences on defence issues and foreign policy.

The parties have disparate views on what to do about an agreement backed by the outgoing administration to close the US Marine airfield in the crowded city of Futenma and find a new location for it elsewhere on the southern island of Okinawa, an issue that could complicate the new government's relations with Washington.

News in Brief

UN slams Lankan expulsion

AFP, United Nations

UN chief Ban Ki-moon Tuesday denounced a decision by the Sri Lankan government to expel a UNicef spokesman, who allegedly took a pro-rebel stance at the end of the island's ethnic war.

"The secretary-general strongly regrets the decision of the Sri Lankan government to expel Mr. James Elder," Ban's office said in a statement.

Army officer, 2 rebels die in Kashmir clash

AFP, Srinagar

An Indian army major and two militants died in a gunbattle Wednesday along the de facto border dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan, the army said.

The fighting erupted early Wednesday when a group of heavily armed militants tried to sneak into Indian Kashmir from the Pakistani-zone of the disputed state, army spokesman Biplab Nath told AFP.

China mine blast toll rises to 42

AFP, Beijing

The death toll from a gas explosion at a coal mine in central China has risen to 42, with 37 workers still trapped underground, state media reported Wednesday, citing local officials.

The deadly blast, the latest to rock the notoriously dangerous coal mining industry here, took place early Tuesday in a small mine in Pingdingshan city in Henan province, officials said.

BJP legislators quit in Jharkhand

They demand assembly polls

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Ranchi

All 22 legislators of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Jharkhand Wednesday handed over their resignations to Governor K. Shankar Narayan demanding early elections in the state that has been under president's rule since Jan 19.

BJP legislators and party leaders met the governor at the state secretariat to hand over their resignations and

also submitted a memorandum seeking early elections and demanding that the state assembly be dissolved.

Accompanied by state party president Raghubar Das and Lok Sabha MPs Arjun Munda and Yashwant Sinha, the delegation then went to meet speaker Aalamgir Aalam to resign as members of the legislative assembly.

The Congress is setting a 'wrong precedent by not holding elections in the state. Why

are assembly elections in Jharkhand not taking place with Haryana, Maharashtra and Arunachal Pradesh where polls will take place on Oct 13," Das told reporters.

"The Congress lost its ground in the Lok Sabha elections and is trying to regain its position by using the governor, who is playing the role of a Congress agent."

The BJP has also petitioned the Supreme Court in the matter.



An Indian man rides a 'donga' raft to cross a flooded road in Ghatal, some 95km south of Kolkata yesterday. Four people, including two children, were killed in West Bengal floods caused by rains and water release from a Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) reservoir, which led to flash flooding in five districts of the state.

Cities trap more CO2 than rain forests

ANI, Washington

A surprising new study has found that cities trap more carbon dioxide (CO2) than rain forests.

According to a report in National Geographic News, compared with tropical rain forests, cities store more carbon, acre for acre, in their trees, buildings, and dirt.

"Everyone thinks about the tropical forests, but I don't think people consider cities as a way to store carbon," said study leader Galina Churkina of the Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research in Germany.

"Although a lot of studies have focused on carbon in forests, grasslands, and

other natural ecosystems, looking at cities—which now house half of the world's population—is relatively new," Churkina said.

Intentionally storing carbon in cities could be one approach to counter global warming, she added.

Churkina and colleagues pulled together previous evidence looking at various stores of organic carbon, which comes from living things, as well as from such as plants and animals, wood, dirt, and even garbage.

Cities, including both dense metropolises and sprawling suburbs, store about a tenth of all the carbon in US ecosystems, the study estimated.

'Pakistan's double-game helped Laden escape allied forces'

ANI, Washington

Pakistan's 'double game' and its undercover relationship with the Taliban and al-Qaeda helped Osama bin-Laden escape the allied forces and prevented him from being nabbed, The Times online reports.

Pakistan's connection with al-Qaeda dates back to 1980's when the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) helped the CIA to supply arms, ammunition and financial help to bin-Laden and other members of the Mujahideen resistance against Soviet forces.

Following the 9/11 carnage, the United States made it clear that Pakistan must co-operate in the 'war on terror' and

pressed it to flush out the ISI of Taliban and al-Qaeda supporters, the report said.

However, Islamabad continued its support to the outlawed outfits.

According to the report several thousands of Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives were airlifted out of the northern Afghan region of Kunduz in November 2001 by Pakistani agencies.

During the same period several more al-Qaeda commanders, probably including bin-Laden sneaked into Pakistan from the southeastern Afghan region of Tora Bora, where the Nato forces had initiated a massive hunt operation for the Qaeda chief, the report said.

Extortion, mugging go unabated

FROM PAGE 16

Shaheen Qadir, 35, a construction worker, was gunned down by extortionists as he refused to hand over their telephone number to his employer.

Notorious Dakat Shahid gang opened fire in Mirpur Swadhin Bangla Super Market around two months ago that left one dead and nine others wounded.

In some cases police deployment cannot ensure security of businessmen. A gang sprayed bullets on the workers of Memorial Holdings Limited, a real estate company, at Senpara in Kafrul, on September 2 that left a security guard wounded.

Wishing anonymity the

top police official said due to shortage of manpower he had to turn down several other appeals for deploying force at different places.

Extortion by political party men is also quite rampant, sources said.

"I have been asked to give Tk 20,000 per month if I want to run my business," said owner of a steel furniture shop on Elephant Road who himself is an Awami League (AL) activist in the area.

Wishing anonymity he said they used to extort Tk 30,000 per month from different shops and he also used to get a share from the money as a party worker.

In Mirpur, the brother of a woman AL leader recently confined a businessman who

finally got back his freedom paying Tk 20,000.

The businessman had returned from Korea a couple of years ago and started a small business in partnership with another man.

Following a dispute over the business, his partner hired the woman AL leader's brother who is now an influential musclemen in Mirpur area.

In desperation, the businessman contacted a central AL leader who could not help him. He said if only Sheikh Hasina call the woman AL leader he can get back the money, said one of his relatives.

Police also arrested four BCL leaders of Dhaka College

unit while they were allegedly collecting tolls from a shop near the college recently.

Recently a lawyer formally informed the Dhaka University authorities about how Surya Sen Hall unit ex-BCL president Lavlu Mollah Shishir and his thugs confined his driver to the university playground for about six hours with his private car and finally released him on payment of Tk 40,000.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently expressed her utter dismay saying she is shocked to see newspaper reports on the extortion by BCL men.

"No matter whether you are moving among crowds in

daytime or at night, in a rickshaw or in a private car, you may fall victim to mugging anytime as petty crimes like street mugging have increased ahead of Eid," a city dweller said.

Even at home or at office you may not be in peace as different phone gangs may reach you over your personal cellphone or land phone to demand hefty amount of extortion, he said.

A statistics of DMP show that 43 incidents of mugging have been recorded by police in July while 59 in June. It also show that only eleven cases have been filed in connection with extortion in July while 14 cases in June.



Nepalese Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal (C) greets former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell (L) while Nepalese actress Karishma Manandhar looks on at a luncheon for a campaign against Gender Based Violence in Kathmandu yesterday.