

US Senate votes to triple aid to Pakistan

AFP, Washington

The US Senate voted Thursday to triple non-military aid to Pakistan to roughly 1.5 billion dollars per year through 2014 in a bid to build trust and cooperation with a key ally against extremism.

US President Barack Obama's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, called the vote "a very important step forward" for sometimes tense relations between the United States and Pakistan.

Holbrooke spoke after Obama, Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari, and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown led a summit grouping 26 countries and international organizations known as the "Friends of Democratic Pakistan."

The Senate's unanimous approval set the stage for action in the House of Representatives, where the measure was introduced hours later and a final vote was expected soon to send it to Obama to sign into law.

Supporters of the legislation -- an updated version of a bill backed by Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when they were senators -- say the measure aims to banish any doubts that Washington has made a long-term commitment to helping Pakistan.

The measure, which seeks to use economic development to battle the despair that can fuel extremism, comes at a time when Obama has vowed to overhaul US strategy for Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan.

The new aid would seek to foster economic growth and democratic reforms in Pakistan, notably by helping democratic institutions and the country's educational system flourish.

The measure also authorises unspecified military aid in such sums as are necessary to help Pakistan battle al-Qaeda and other Islamist fighters, but requires that such assistance flow through Pakistan's democratically elected government.

It also requires that the government in Islamabad demonstrate a sustained effort to combat extremist groups and show progress towards defeating them.

Pakistan's lawless semi-autonomous areas in the northwest have been beset by violence after Taliban and al-Qaeda

rebels sought refuge there following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.

Supporters of the legislation said it would help convince doubting Pakistanis that the United States will stand by them in what is likely to be a long struggle against extremists.

Democratic Senator John Kerry, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a lead author of the bill, said it would help "forge a new long-term relationship between the people of America and Pakistan."

"It is my hope and expectation that the House will pass this bill speedily, so that the President can sign it into law without delay," said Kerry.

"We should make clear to the people of Pakistan that our interests are focused on democracy, pluralism, stability, and the fight against terrorism," said Senator Richard Lugar, the top Republican on Kerry's panel.

"If Pakistan is to break its debilitating cycle of instability, it will need to achieve progress on fighting corruption, delivering government services, and promoting broad based economic growth," said Lugar.



PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama welcome Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife Gursharan Kaur to the G20 dinner at the Phipps Conservatory on Thursday in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



PHOTO: AFP

A traditional Sri Lankan dancer performs in a Hindu ritual at the National Parliament yesterday. The annual event seeks to invoke blessings for members of parliament in the predominantly Buddhist nation.

5 US troops killed in Afghan attacks

AP, Kabul

Five American troops were killed in attacks in southern Afghanistan, where the US and Nato have ramped up operations against the Taliban and seen casualties rise quickly in what has been the deadliest year of the war for international forces.

Four soldiers died Thursday in the same small district of Zabul province, including three killed when their Stryker vehicle struck a bomb, said US military spokesman Lt Robert Carr. The fourth was shot to death in an insurgent attack, Carr said. The Stryker brigade in Zabul is part of the influx of US troops sent by President Barack Obama over the summer to try to reverse Taliban

gains.

A US Marine was fatally shot Thursday while on foot patrol in Nimroz province, said Capt. Elizabeth Mathias, a military spokeswoman.

The deaths come as the Obama administration debates whether to send still more forces to Afghanistan.

The Pentagon said the US and Nato commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, would ask this week for additional American forces a number that officials said could reach as high as 40,000 troops. But some question the wisdom of sending more troops to support a government facing hundreds of fraud allegations from the disputed Aug. 20 presidential election.

US drone attack kills 10 militants in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

A US drone attack in Pakistan's tribal belt killed 10 militants from an al-Qaeda-linked network that is fighting Western troops in Afghanistan, officials said Friday.

The strike by a suspected US spy plane was the fourth this month in North Waziristan, where militants linked to Taliban and al-Qaeda who are fighting against 100,000 US and Nato troops in Afghanistan are said to be hiding.

"We believe that all the 10 men killed in the strike were Afghans as the compound belonged to the Haqqani network," a senior security official in the area told AFP on condition of anonymity.

But the individual identities of the dead and whether there were any high value targets were not immediately clear.

"We are collecting information about the identity of all those killed in the attack," the official said. At least five militants were wounded, he added.

The Haqqani network is a powerful Afghan group based in northwest Pakistan closely linked to al-Qaeda and known for its sophisticated attacks targeting the Afghan government and foreign troops in Afghanistan.

It is led by former Mujahideen leader Jalaludin Haqqani, who was a hero of the resistance against Soviet occupation during the 1980s. He aligned himself with the

Taliban in the 1990s and became an important insurgent leader in 2003.

His son Siraj is believed to have taken recent command of the network.

The compound hit by the US spy plane late Thursday was said to be the home of Afghan national Ahmad Afghani.

There were unconfirmed reports that a son of Jalaluddin Haqqani is called Ahmad. Officials said it was not yet clear whether Ahmad was present at the time of attack in the Dandya Darpa Khel area of North Waziristan.

Local residents said the attack took place while militants were sleeping, around 15 to 30 minutes before midnight Thursday.

Obama not 'inclined' to beef up Afghan force

Says US lawmaker

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama's administration made clear in July that it "wasn't inclined" to send more combat troops to Afghanistan, a top Republican lawmaker said in an interview published Thursday.

In comments denied by the Pentagon, Representative Buck McKeon, the senior House Armed Services Committee Republican, told a newspaper that focuses on the US Congress that the message came from Defence Secretary Robert Gates.

McKeon told Roll Call that Gates told him during a July trip to Afghanistan that Obama "wasn't inclined" to send more combat troops there as part of an overhauled strategy for winning the nearly eight-year-old war.

Gates spokesman Geoff Morrell cast doubt on the comments, saying "we do not believe that the secretary would have ever told him -- or anyone else for that matter -- that President Obama was disinclined to send forces to Afghanistan."

"That's just not plausible

because the issue of whether to send more forces is what will be discussed and debated once the president's strategy review has been completed and both he and Secretary Gates have been very clear that they are still undecided on the way ahead in Afghanistan," said Morrell.

McKeon also said Gates also told him that Obama had "given instructions" to the top US military commanders in Afghanistan and in the region, Generals Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus, not to ask for too many more soldiers.

China charges 21 with murder in July riots

AP, Beijing

Chinese prosecutors brought murder and arson charges Friday against 21 people arrested in connection with riots in July that left nearly 200 dead in Urumqi.

The riots in the capital of the western region of Xinjiang saw Muslim Uighurs attack members of the country's dominant Han ethnic group, followed two days later by Han attacks on Uighurs. It was the worst ethnic violence in China in decades.

Police have said hundreds were detained following the riots, which the government says also injured more than 1,700.

Fight against Maoists to be long drawn

Says Chidambaram

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Raipur

Home Minister P Chidambaram Friday said the central government would extend all support to states to counter and defeat left-wing extremism in what would be a 'long-drawn' fight.

"It is a long drawn fight against Naxals (Maoists). The centre is totally supporting Chhattisgarh in its efforts to counter left wing extremism," he told reporters at the state secretariat where he reviewed the state's internal security situation in the wake of police and paramilitary forces mounting an onslaught against the Maoist rebels.

Chidambaram, who refused to take any questions, said his visit to Chhattisgarh was to assure the centre's support in the state's fight against the Naxalites and to offer his condolences to the policemen who had laid down their lives while fighting the rebels.

Referring to the July 12 incident in which 29 police personnel, including Superintendent of Police VK Choubey, were killed in a Maoist ambush at Madanwara in Rajnandgaon district, he said the state government had taken prompt action to provide relief to the families of the killed security personnel.

Feathered fossils found in China confirm that birds evolved from dinosaurs

ANI, London

Chinese scientists have said that the discovery of five remarkable new fossils of feathered dinosaurs in rock formations in northeastern China, has confirmed that birds evolved from dinosaurs.

According to a report in the Guardian, the fossils are older than previous discoveries of similar creatures.

The fossils all have feathers or feather-like structures. The clearest and most striking of the specimens can be seen to have four wings, extensive plumage and profusely feathered feet.

"These exceptional fossils provide us with evidence that has been missing until now," said Xu Xing, one of the scientists who made the discovery. "Now it all fits neatly into place and we have tied up some of the loose ends," he added.

The new finds date back to between 151 and 164 million years ago, which suggest they are older than Archaeopteryx, previously thought to be the oldest undisputed bird.

"The fossils provide confirmation that the bird-dinosaur hypothesis is correct, and supports the idea that birds descended from theropod dinosaurs (the group of predatory dinosaurs that includes allosaurus and velociraptor)," said Xing.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) Chairman Madhavan Nair gives a press conference at the ISRO office in Bangalore yesterday. Nair confirmed the discovery of water molecules by the moon mineralogy mapper (M3) through its Lunar mission Chandrayaan-1.

Scientists find key to unlock oxygen from moon's surface

ANI, Washington

Following the discovery of water on the Moon by an instrument aboard India's recently ended Chandrayaan-1 spacecraft, researchers from Nasa and Case Western Reserve University have found a key to unlocking oxygen from the surface of the moon, which would help make a space outpost possible in the future.

Scientists from Nasa and Case Western Reserve are designing and testing components of an oxygen generator

that would extract the element from silicon dioxide and metal oxides in the ground.

They have designed sifters needed to produce a consistent supply of oxides.

To find out how the sifters would work in the moon's gravity, which is about one-sixth as strong as the Earth's, Katie Frommiller, a senior civil engineering student, and Julie Kleinhenz, an assistant research professor of aerospace and mechanical engineering, spent two days flying in high arcs off the Texas coast last month.



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