

Obama in no hurry to send extra troops to Afghanistan

AFP, Jacksonville

US President Barack Obama is vowing that despite criticism that he is dithering, he will not rush a fateful decision on whether to send tens of thousands more troops to Afghanistan.

Obama on Monday promised US troops a clear mission before pitching them into the worsening battle, after conducting the latest meeting of his war council, which is mounting an exhaustive review of Afghan and Pakistan strategy.

He spoke on another grim day for US troops in Afghanistan, after 14 Americans died in two helicopter crashes, underscoring the growing toll of the increasingly unpopular eight-year war.

"I will never hesitate to use force to protect the American people or our vital interests, I also promise you this -- and this is very important as we consider our next steps in Afghanistan," Obama told military personnel in Florida.

"I will never rush the solemn decision

of sending you into harm's way."

"I won't risk your lives unless it is absolutely necessary, and if it is necessary, we will back you up."

"Because you deserve the strategy, the clear mission, the defined goals and the equipment and support you need to get the job done."

Obama critics, some senior Republicans among them, have complained Obama's weeks-long security review is dragging on too long. Former vice president Dick Cheney last week accused the president of "dithering."

The president flew to Florida from Washington, after meeting his top national security advisors in the White House Situation Room.

The talks ran longer than expected, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said, but added there was no change to the expectation that Obama would announce the eagerly awaited decision "in the coming weeks."

Obama said last week that he might

make up his mind on war commander General Stanley McChrystal's request for 40,000 more troops before the Afghan run-off election on November 7, but might not announce the decision.

Political pressure over the war is mounting on Obama, following revelations of corruption in the Afghan government, a quickening insurgency and a spike in deaths of US and Nato troops.

In his remarks at a naval air station in Jacksonville, Florida, Obama paid tribute to 14 American service personnel killed in two helicopter crashes in Afghanistan, saying they died to thwart al-Qaeda's hopes of terror haven.

"Our prayers are with these service members, their civilian colleagues and the families who loved them," said Obama.

"While no words can ease the ache in their hearts today, may they find some comfort in knowing this: like all those who give their lives in service to America, they were doing their duty and they were doing this nation proud."



PHOTO: AFP
Afghan pedestrians walk past an election poster of Abdullah Abdullah, former Afghan foreign minister in Kabul yesterday. Afghanistan's presidential rivals are reining their campaigns for a second round of vote, but analysts question whether a new election can be credible as calls for a government of national unity persist.

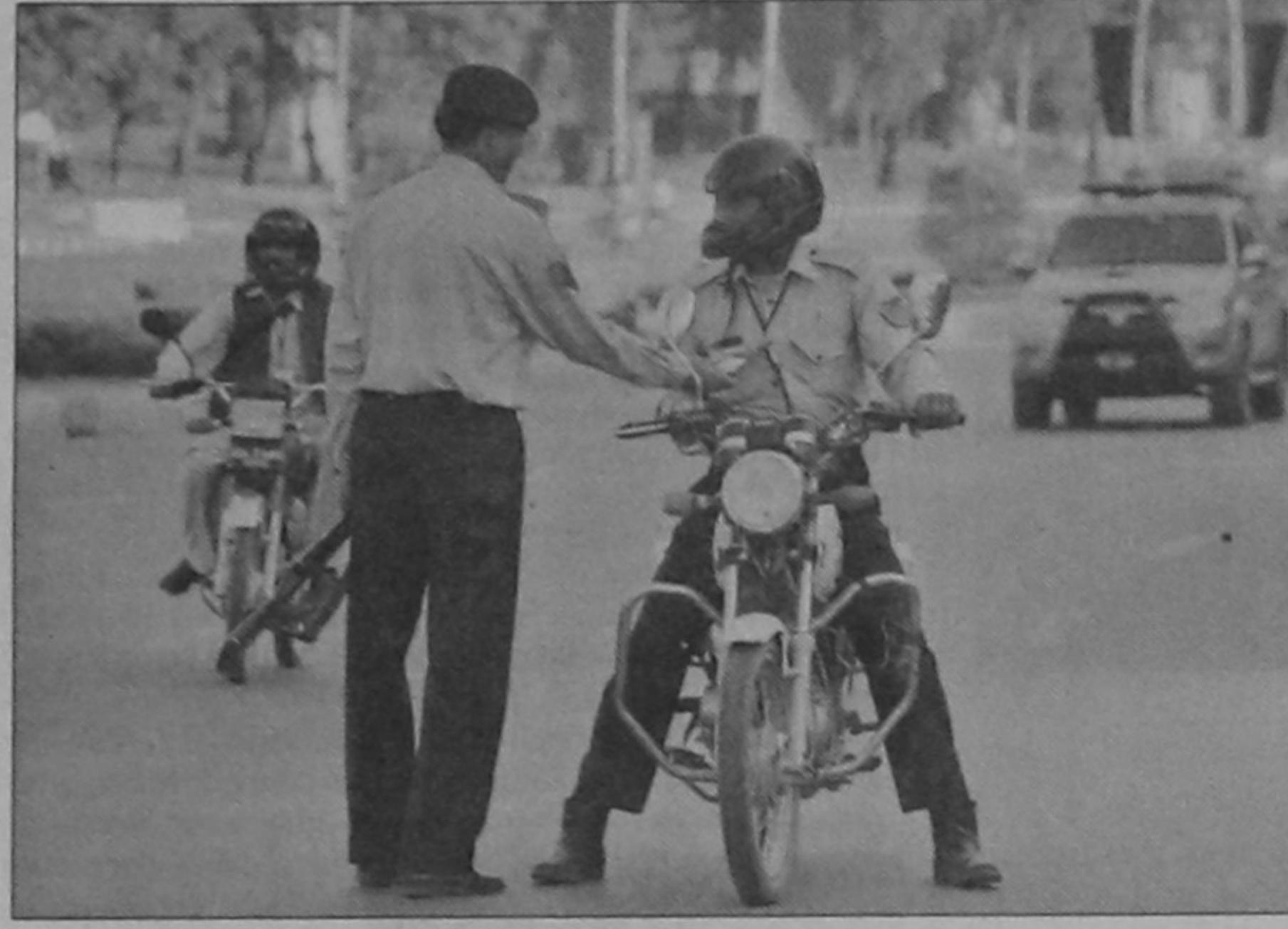


PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani policeman checks the identity card of a colleague in front of the National Assembly during the address by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Islamabad on Monday after security red alert on Constitution Avenue.

Solution of Kashmir critical for better Indo-Pak ties

Says Qureshi

ANI, Muzaffarabad

Pakistan Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, has said that a solution to the Kashmir dispute is critical for better ties between Pakistan and India.

He also emphasised that there was a dire need to resolve the issue in accordance with the aspirations of Kashmiris.

Qureshi further said that the Pakistan Government had invited Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for the resumption of composite dialogue, which was necessary for ensuring peace in the region.

The Foreign Minister has regularly raised his voice for a solution to the Kashmir dispute. In the recent past he had also held inter-ministerial meetings and taken Kashmiri representatives from both sides of the border into confidence.

He had also discussed the issue during his meeting with Indian External Affairs Minister SM Krishna last month.

Stoking terror will backfire

India tells Pakistan

UNI, New Delhi

Asserting that Pakistan was abetting terrorism in India, especially Jammu and Kashmir, Union Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad yesterday said the frequent terror attacks in Pakistan indicated that those who promote terrorism cannot themselves escape from it.

"Pakistan has an agenda to abet terrorism in the Valley which has been a victim of such attacks for two decades," Azad said.

"India has been a victim of across-border terror for a very long time. We have faced terrorism in Punjab which is still continuing in J&K. But now, Pakistan being targeted every second day... This proves that those who promote terror, can't escape it too," the former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister averred.

He was addressing the 2nd International Conference "Terrorism -- National and International" organised by Jama Masjid United Forum (JMUF).

"Terror attacks affect the FDI growth which is vital for country's economic growth. Terrorism has a very detrimental impact from the economic point of view. The Jaipur and IT Bangalore blasts, and the 26/11 Mumbai carnage depict the larger gameplan of the terrorists to destabilise India," the senior Congress leaders said.

Azad said terrorists have wreaked havoc on the tourism sector in J&K and its people stand helpless in front of militancy. "Its the Muslims who have suffered the most in the Valley because of terrorism."

Thousands of people, including 14,808 Muslims and 17,47 Hindus, have fallen prey to terrorism in the last two decades," he claimed.

Lanka govt may sign treaty banning landmine

APP, Colombo

Sri Lanka may consider joining the global treaty banning landmines following the government's defeat of separatist Tamil Tiger rebels, the army chief said yesterday.

Sri Lanka had previously refused to sign up to the 1997 Ottawa Convention against landmines, arguing that the military could not unilaterally abandon mines in their bloody fight against the Tamil Tigers.

"With the end of conflict (in May), we have had the opportunity to review Sri Lanka's position," Lieutenant General Jagath Jayasuriya said.

The Sri Lankan military estimates that there could be 1.5 million mines scattered across the island's north. Jayasuriya told a seminar in the capital Colombo.

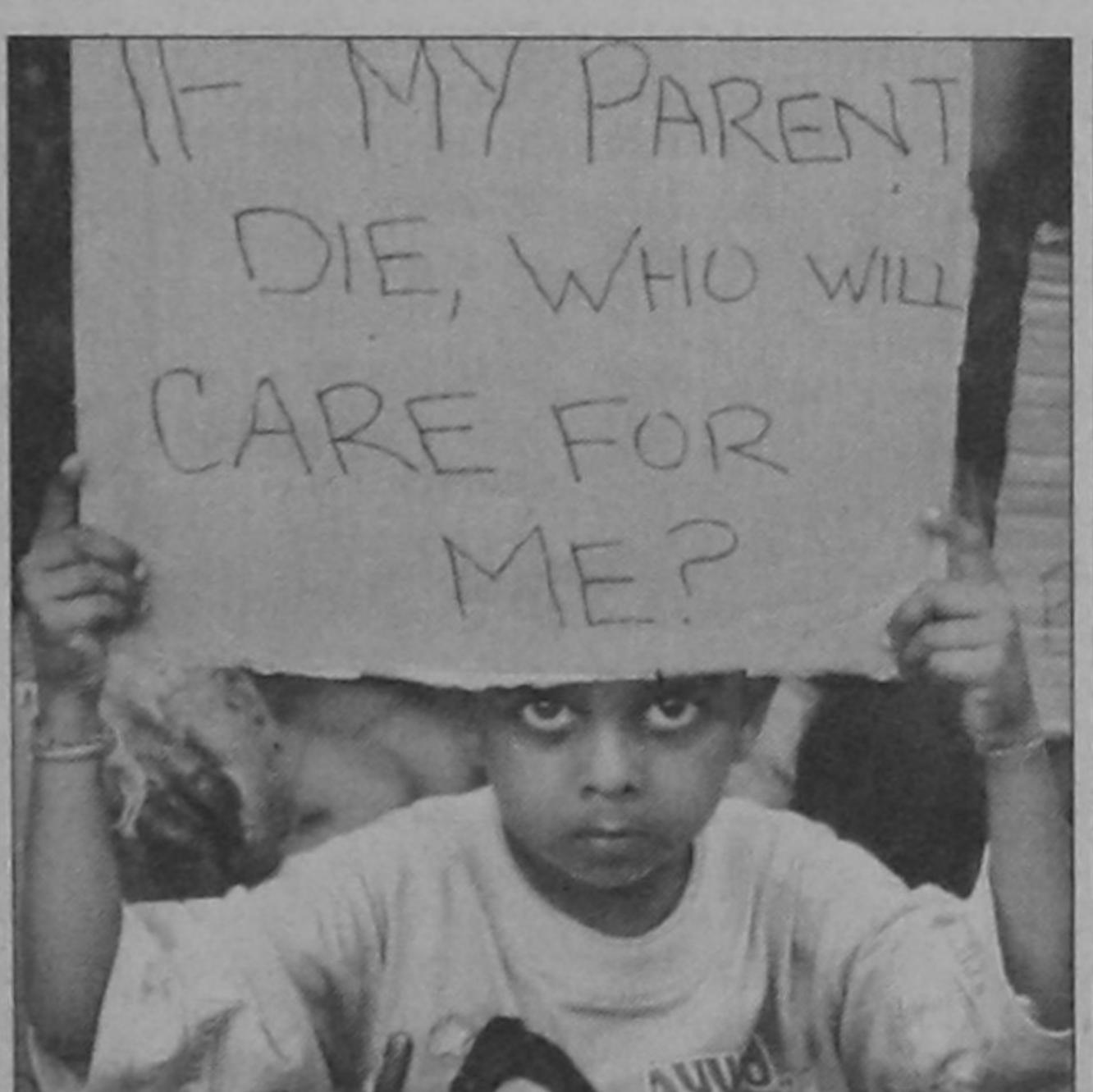


PHOTO: AFP
A young Sri Lankan asylum-seeker holds up a placard during a protest on board his boat at Merak seaport in Serang, on Indonesia's Java island, on Monday.

Some Indian states found wanting on religious freedom: US

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

A US government report gave top rating to the Indian government for doing its best to protect religious freedom, but criticised some state and local governments for imposing limits on this freedom.

The National Government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, some state and local governments imposed limits on this freedom," the State Department said Monday in its biennial report on International Religious Freedom.

"Although the vast majority of citizens of every religious group lived in peaceful coexistence, some organised societal attacks against minority religious groups occurred," the report said, adding "the state police and enforcement agencies often did not act swiftly to effectively counter such attacks."

Releasing the report covering 198 countries, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hoped it will encourage existing religious freedom move-

ments around the world and promote dialogue among governments and within societies.'

The report said the phrase 'generally respected' signifies that the government attempted to protect religious freedom in the fullest sense and was 'thus the highest level of respect for religious freedom assigned' by it.

Religious extremists, it noted, committed numerous terrorist attacks throughout India, including the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai that targeted luxury hotels, a crowded railway station, a Jewish centre, a hospital, and restaurants.

The report noted 40 persons died and 134 were injured as 'violence erupted in August 2008 in Orissa after individuals affiliated with left-wing Maoist extremists killed a Hindu religious leader in Kandhamal, one of the country's poorest districts.'

"Although most victims were Christians, the underlying causes that led to the violence have complex ethnic, economic, religious, and political roots related to land ownership and government-reserved employment and educational benefits," it said.

Karzai rebuffs calls for sacking of election commission chief

AFP, Kabul

President Hamid Karzai's office brushed off new calls yesterday for Afghanistan's election chief to be sacked ahead of a run-off poll, saying there was no reason for his head to roll over first-round fraud.

Presidential spokesman Humayun Hamidzada said a demand by Karzai's challenger Abdullah Abdullah for Independent Electoral Commission chairman Azizullah Ludin to be immediately replaced had no basis in law and the IEC chief had done "absolutely nothing wrong".

But as Karzai's camp threw its support behind Ludin, a leading think tank said the IEC chief and other officials implicated in the fraud on August 20 should be replaced before the November 7 run-off.

"In the remaining days before the second round, IEC chairman Azizullah Ludin should be replaced, and IEC staff and government officials implicated in the fraud should be removed," said the International Crisis Group.

Karzai was forced into a run-off against Abdullah when he fell fractionally short of the 50 percent threshold in the first round, after around a third of his initial tally of votes were disqualified through fraud.

Participants at the conference, which also includes the World Bank, the World Wildlife Fund and other groups, plan to discuss strategies for tiger conservation, as well as challenges such as poaching, the trade of tiger parts and conflicts between tigers and local populations.

"Despite our efforts in the last three decades, tigers still face threats of survival. The primary threat is from poaching and habitat loss," Nepal's Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal told the conference.

The world's tiger population is declining fast despite efforts to save them, and new strategies are urgently needed to keep the species from dying out, international wildlife experts said yesterday.

"We are assembled here to save tigers that are at the verge of extinction," Nepal's secretary of forest and soil conservation, Yuvraj Bhushal, told a conference of tiger experts from 20 countries, including the 13 where wild tigers are still found.

An estimated 3,500 to 4,000 tigers now roam the world's forests, down from the more than 100,000 estimated at the beginning of the 20th century. All the remaining tigers are in Asia.

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