

Afghan build-up involves 30,000 troops in 6 months

AP, Washington

A senior administration official told The Associated Press yesterday that President Barack Obama is sending 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan to be deployed over six months.

In his speech to the nation Tuesday night, Obama also will lay out a rough timeframe, including some dates, for when the main US military mission will end. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the details had not yet been announced.

The 30,000 new troops will bring the total in Afghanistan to more than 100,000 US forces. The main mission of the new troops will be to reverse Taliban gains and secure population centres in the volatile south and east parts of the country.

New infusions of US Marines will begin moving into Afghanistan almost as soon as President Barack Obama announces a redrawn battle strategy, a plan widely expected to include more than 30,000 additional US forces.

Obama will try to sell a sceptical public on his bigger, costlier war plan Tuesday by coupling the large new troop infusion with an emphasis on stepped-up training

for Afghan forces that he says will allow the US to leave.

Obama formally ends a 92-day review of the war in Afghanistan Tuesday night with a nationally broadcast address in which he will lay out his revamped strategy from the US Military Academy at West Point, NY. He began rolling out his decision Sunday night, informing key administration officials, military advisers and foreign allies in a series of private meetings and phone calls that stretched into Monday.

Military officials said at least one group of Marines is expected to deploy within two or three weeks of Obama's announcement, and would be in Afghanistan by Christmas. Larger deployments wouldn't be able to follow until early in 2010.

The initial infusion is recognition by the administration that something tangible needs to happen quickly, officials said. The quick addition of Marines would provide badly needed reinforcements to those fighting against Taliban gains in the southern Helmand province, and could lend reassurance to both Afghans and a war-weary US public.

The war escalation includes sending 30,000 to 35,000 more American forces

into Afghanistan in a graduated deployment over the next year, on top of the 71,000 already there. Obama's announcement is the culmination of more than three months of debate over whether and how to expand US military involvement in a war that has turned worse this year despite Obama's previous infusion of 21,000 forces.

But the numbers of fresh troops don't tell the whole story, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said Tuesday. "It's what their mission is," he told ABC's "Good Morning America." "We're going to accelerate going after al-Qaida and its extremist allies. We'll accelerate the training of an Afghan national security force, a police and an army."

In Kabul, Lt Gen William B Caldwell, the new head of a US-Nato command responsible for training and developing Afghan soldiers and police, said Tuesday that although the groundwork is being laid to expand the Afghan National Army beyond the current target of 134,000 troops, to be reached by Oct 31, 2010, no fixed higher target is set.

There is a notional goal of eventually fielding 240,000 soldiers and 160,000 police, but Caldwell said that could change.



PHOTO: AFP

In this file photograph taken on November 11, 2009 US Army soldiers from 2-506 Infantry 101st Airborne Division and Afghan National Army soldiers race to get out of the way of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter landing in hostile territory during a launch of an operation in Khost province, five km from the Afghan-Pakistan Border. US President Barack Obama yesterday made a globally awaited address on his new Afghan war plan and big troop surge strategy.

India blocks 25m mobiles for security reasons

BBC ONLINE

Millions of Indian mobile phones with no valid unique identification code have been blocked for security reasons yesterday.

The International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number the operator's network whenever a call is made.

The absence of this number makes it impossible to trace either the caller or the phone or to access call details.

Indian intelligence agencies say phones without the code have been used in attacks by militant groups.

Mobile phones without the

code were blocked at midnight - operators were asked to bar calls to them "in the wake of increased threat perception from militants".

It is estimated that India has more than 25 million phones without codes. Phones with no codes or invalid numbers are mostly cheap, unbranded phones. Millions are manufactured in India or imported, mostly from China.

Correspondents say these phones are popular because they are usually much cheaper than the branded ones.

Many phone subscribers said they were being wrongly penalised because they were

not aware that every handset had to have a code.

The Cellular Operators' Association of India has asked the government to extend the deadline for blocking the numbers so that it can install identity numbers on unbranded devices.

According to estimates by the Indian Cellular Association, unbranded phones account for nearly 30% of all sales in India.

India has the fastest growing mobile phone market in the world, with more than 488 million subscribers.

Every month millions of new subscribers are added to the list.

China building airstrips, India says no need to worry

PTI, New Delhi

With reports suggesting that China was building over two dozen new airstrips along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), Government today said there was no need to be "unnecessarily" worried as India was adequately strengthening itself.

"I don't think we need to be unnecessarily alarmed. As a regional power, they (China) will strengthen their infrastructure. They will procure their arms and we are doing what we have to do for strengthening our line," Minister of State for Defence MM Pallam Raju told reporters.

The Minister was asked to respond on reports claiming that China was building 27 airstrips along the LAC.

There is no need to be "unnecessarily worried" about what other countries are doing, Raju said, adding "as far as our programmes are going smoothly and we are doing adequately to strengthen ourselves."

Obama calls Manmohan, discusses climate change

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Ahead of the climate change summit in Copenhagen, US President Barack Obama yesterday talked with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who conveyed to him that New Delhi would play a constructive role in the negotiations for a new deal to tackle global warming.

During the brief telephonic conversation, the two leaders also discussed the situation in Afghanistan and the further steps that could be taken to bring peace and stability in that country, an official statement here said.

The two leaders discussed the forthcoming summit on Climate Change in Copenhagen and "the Prime Minister told the President that India would play a constructive role in the negotiations and looked forward to a successful outcome", it said.

Obama's phone call to Singh came even as there is no official confirmation whether the Indian Prime Minister would attend the Copenhagen summit.

It also came amidst reports that major developing countries like India, China, Brazil and South Africa have prepared a draft climate change pact to counter the developed nations at the Copenhagen summit.

Indian Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh, who attended a meeting of the four key developing countries in Beijing last week, said the draft presented by Denmark is totally unacceptable.

The Danish draft mentions 2025 as the "peaking year" for India in greenhouse gas emissions, a separate schedule for developing countries and a review mechanism for unsupported mitigation actions by developing nations.

Suicide blast kills local lawmaker in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

A suicide bomber killed a provincial lawmaker and his brother yesterday in Pakistan's northwest Swat valley, where the military claims to have quashed a Taliban uprising.

A man with explosives strapped to his body walked apparently unchallenged into the grounds of a property owned by provincial assembly member Shamsheer Ali Khan and blew himself up, killing the two men and wounding several others, officials said.

The attack against a member of the Awami National Party, which dominates the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) assembly, came as Taliban insurgents stage a wave of attacks avenging a multi-pronged military offensive against them.

"Dr Shamsheer Ali Khan and his brother were killed in the suicide attack," Swat police chief Qazi Ghulam Farooq told AFP.

Senior local police official Ali Khan told AFP that the politician had been sitting on the lawn in front of his house receiving guests and local constituents when a man in his early 20s rushed up to him.

"His brother also rushed to save the lawmaker but the bomber blew himself up before he could be prevented," the police official said.

Spin Zada, a doctor at a local government hospital, confirmed that two bodies including that of Khan, 59, were brought to the hospital.

Eleven others were wounded in the blast in Kanju town, about 30 km northwest of Swat's main hub Mingora, he said.

Swat was the focus of a fierce military

offensive launched earlier this year to rid the northwestern valley of Taliban militants, who had seized many key towns in the one-time tourist paradise.

Officials in the ANP said that Khan -- a lawyer by profession -- had received death threats from the Taliban ahead of the military offensive.

Swat slipped out of government control in July 2007 after radical cleric Maulana Fazlullah mounted a violent campaign in which his followers beheaded opponents, burnt schools and fought to enforce Islamic Sharia law.

The army launched an offensive in April and says at least 2,150 militants have been killed in Swat and neighbouring Buner and Lower Dir districts.

The military now claims to have almost cleared the scenic valley of Islamist fighters, but sporadic attacks continue to plague the mountain region.

Another military offensive is now raging in the semi-autonomous northwest tribal belt which runs along the Afghan border, with Islamabad vowing to hunt down the core leadership of the feared Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.

Insurgents retaliated with a wave of suicide attacks killing more than 430 people in the past two months, although there had been a lull in recent weeks.

Security has drastically deteriorated in Pakistan since Islamabad joined the US-led "war on terror" and hundreds of Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked militants fled into the tribal belt after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

Myanmar junta fights against spreading AIDS

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military junta said yesterday that it was doing its best to fight the spread of the disease, as sufferers gathered at the country's opposition headquarters to mark World AIDS Day.

The state-run New Light of Myanmar newspaper gave details of government spending on combating HIV and said that cases in the Southeast Asian nation had dropped in recent years.

"The government is fighting AIDS with the use of manpower and financial power," the government mouthpiece English-language daily said.

The newspaper said Myanmar spent 191.4 million Kyats (190,000 dollars) in 2007 in fighting AIDS. It added that UNAIDS figures showed that cases fell from 0.94 percent of the population in 2004 to 0.67 percent in 2007.

But it did not give any further information or more recent figures.



PHOTO: AFP

War-displaced Sri Lankan civilians, clutching their meagre belongings, walk out of a detention camp in Vavuniya on December 1, 2009. Thousands of Sri Lankan civilians locked in state-run camps during the island's ethnic conflict walked free yesterday, officials said, ending mass detentions that were criticised by the UN. The camps held 280,000 people at their peak in May when fierce fighting between government forces and the rebel Tamil Tigers ended with the eradication of the Tiger leadership.

Sri Lanka frees all Tamils held in war camps

AFP, Colombo

Thousands of Sri Lankan civilians locked in state-run camps during the island's ethnic conflict walked free yesterday, officials said, ending mass detentions that were criticised by the UN.

Men, women and children poured out of the Manik Farm complex in the northern district of Vavuniya, but they were expected to remain based in the camps as many of their villages have been destroyed.

"Today more than 1,000 families consisting of about 6,000 persons have already exited the camps," N Thiruganasampanthar, a senior civil servant in Vavuniya, told AFP.

"Transport out of the camps is a problem, but people seem to be very happy."

About 130,000 ethnic Tamil civilians who were kept in detention after government troops defeated separatist forces in May were given freedom of movement, as the government declared the camps "open".

Tamil civilians displaced by the fighting had remained under detention because the government said it needed to screen them for former Tiger rebels.

Conditions inside the tightly guarded facilities have been criticised by the United Nations and international aid groups, with three families often forced to share one small tent meant for six people.

Drinking water and toilets were scarce and many of the temporary shelters flooded during rains.

"We have started a new phase of our re-

settlement programme from today," said GA Chandrasiri, the governor of Northern province. "We have turned all the IDP (internally displaced people) camps into open camps."

Chandrasiri said the inmates were free to leave and return at will, and would be given time to decide whether to return to their villages -- many of which were flattened in the fighting and are still surrounded by minefields.

"They can go to their villages, visit relatives and come back to the camps if they wish. They can stay in the camps until they arrange accommodation elsewhere," Chandrasiri said.

The camps held 280,000 people at their peak in May, when the military finally wiped out the leadership of the Tamil Tiger rebels after decades of bloody warfare.

Under intense international pressure, the government has promised to close down all the camps by the end of January.

The UN had already welcomed the government's decision, announced last month, to allow the inmates freedom of movement.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch also backed the release, but warned that the government was still holding 11,000 Tamils as Tiger rebel suspects.

It said action must be taken either to release them or bring them to court.

The government has said a large number of Tamil Tigers in detention would be provided with vocational training to re-integrate into society.

Rights group finds mass graves in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

A human rights group in Indian Kashmir said yesterday it had found unmarked graves containing several thousand bodies in the revolt-hit region during a three-year survey of dozens of villages.

International People's Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice, which calculates 8,000 people have gone missing in the 20-year separatist insurgency, said it had found the unidentified bodies buried in villages bordering Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

The independent Srinagar-

based group said that its report to be released on Wednesday documented 2,700 "unknown, unmarked, and mass graves" containing at least 2,900 bodies.

International human rights groups have in the past called for a probe into whether the unmarked graves held bodies of civilians who have "disappeared" as Indian security forces struggle to contain the Muslim-majority region's revolt.

A police officer who spoke on condition of anonymity said most of the bodies were likely those of Pakistan mili-

tants killed in fighting with Indian forces.

"These militants are always buried as unidentified," he said.

Last year police admitted there are more than 200 unmarked graves in one location but insisted they contained dead rebels and not civilians.

Police said it was not possible to identify every militant killed during gun battles in Indian Kashmir, which has been hit by an insurgency against New Delhi's rule since 1989.

India rejects Danish climate proposal

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday rejected a Danish draft proposal on climate change, which seeks to cap emissions, widening the gulf between rich and poor nations ahead of next week's Copenhagen talks.

Media reports say the Danish offer sets 2025 as a deadline for all countries to cap their emissions irrespective of current levels, essentially blurring the line between the developed world and countries that are still industrialising.

In an interview on the CNN-IBN news channel, Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh said the draft proposal "clearly is unacceptable to us".

India has said any cap on emissions growth would hamper its rapid economic expansion, which relies on heavily polluting fuels like coal.

India has yet to announce any figures for limiting its carbon output ahead of Copenhagen, but insists it will never accept

legally binding emissions targets.

Ramesh said Chinese climate change envoy Xie Zhenhua would soon hand over a more acceptable negotiating draft to Denmark, adding that India stood firm with China, South Africa and Brazil "as far as negotiations are concerned".

Climate envoys from the four developing countries met in Beijing over the weekend, reiterating their position that developed countries must shoulder most carbon emissions cuts.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said last week that India would "sign on to an ambitious global target for emissions reductions" if rich countries paid more to fund mitigation efforts in the poorer world.

But his office later clarified the statement to say India's position had not changed.

The December 7-18 Copenhagen negotiations are aimed at drafting a successor treaty to the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012.



Rahul Gandhi top newsmaker of the year on Yahoo!

PTI, New Delhi

"Oomph" factor does make the likes of Katrina Kaif and Rakhi Sawant popular in online media, but they have been beaten by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi as the top newsmaker on the popular search engine. According to Yahoo! India News, the leading online news website, Rahul emerged clear winner in the newsmaker category, followed by cricketers and Bollywood stars.

"Some of the key stories for Rahul to be the top newsmaker for the year included pulling up the sagging fortunes of the Congress party in Uttar Pradesh, tirelessly working towards making the Congress a youth-oriented party and repudiate Manmohan Singh's offer to take a seat in Cabinet amongst others," the company said in a statement. Following Rahul Gandhi is Katrina Kaif who was in news constantly for her movies and private life.

Reality show star Rakhi Sawant managed a fifth spot after Lalit Modi, cricket's billion-dollar man who changed the face of the game and AR Rahman, who made India proud by winning Oscars this year. Based on the number of clicks registered for a particular news item and time spent by users on the news page of Yahoo! India, the website editorial team collated all the information to come up with a list of top five newsmakers in 2009.