

Taliban blow up girls' school in Pakistan

Militant fighters going to Afghanistan, says top Pak commander

AFP, AP, Peshawari Shakti

The Taliban blew up a girls' school in Pakistan's Khyber district, where troops are fighting against militants in the tribal region bordering Afghanistan, an official said yesterday.

Militants detonated explosives overnight at the government-run school in Bazgarah town, about 40 kilometres (25 miles) west of Peshawar, capital of the violence-plagued North West Frontier Province.

"The building had 21 rooms. All have been completely demolished," local administration chief Shafeerullah Wazir

told AFP by telephone.

There were no casualties because the property was empty at the time.

"Taliban and their local allies are responsible. They are destroying educational institutions to avenge the military operation against their hideouts in the area," said Wazir.

"This was the ninth educational institution blown up in Khyber over the past six weeks," he added.

Islamist militants opposed to co-education and subscribers to Sharia law have destroyed hundreds of schools, mostly for girls, in northwest Pakistan in recent years.

Earlier a top Pakistani Taliban commander says he has sent thousands of fighters to neighbouring Afghanistan to rebuff incoming US troops, a claim that comes as a Pakistani army offensive is believed to have pushed many of his men to flee their main redoubt.

Waliur Rehman told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview Monday night that the Pakistani Taliban remain committed to battling the army in South Waziristan tribal region, but that they are essentially waging a guerrilla war.

Rehman is a deputy to Pakistani Taliban chief Hakimullah Mehsud, and the man in charge of the group's operations in South Waziristan.



Activists of ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) carry placards as they march in support of President Asif Ali Zardari during a rally in Islamabad on Tuesday.

Afghan senator killed at police checkpoint

AFP, Kunduz

An Afghan senator was killed when he drove through a police ambush set for Taliban militants in northern Afghanistan yesterday, officials said.

Mohammad Yunus -- also known as Shirin Agha, or Dear Sir -- was going home in the early hours when the incident occurred in Puli Khumri, capital of troubled northern Baghlan province, Mohammad Akbar Barikzai told AFP.

Barikzai said Yunus, a member of Afghanistan's upper house of parliament representing Baghlan, failed to stop at a police checkpoint set up as part of a planned ambush of Taliban militants.

Zardari blames int'l community for creating militancy, extremism

ANI, Islamabad

Troubled Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari has blamed the international community for creating the 'modern militancy and extremism', and has said that it should help Pakistan to clear the mess.

During a meeting with French Chief of Armed Forces Defence Staff, General Jean-Louis Georgelin, Zardari said international community had created the militancy to wage a proxy against rival ideologies.

"The monsters ... (in the form of) militants and extremists were created by the inter-

national community in the past to fight rival ideologies, and it is the responsibility of the international community to help Pakistan fight and contain the fallout for this South Asian country," The Daily Times quoted Zardari, as saying.

"Non-state actors wanted to push sovereign countries to go to war, and the international community must unite against the threat," he added.

A statement by the Presidency said that matters related to militancy and defence cooperation were discussed during the meeting.

India tightens long-term tourist visa rules

AFP, New Delhi

India has tightened its rules for long-term tourist visas, officials said yesterday, in a move that is causing confusion for travellers and will affect thousands of foreigners in the country.

Under previous rules, tourists on five or 10-year visas were required to leave the country every 180 days. But many would simply fly to a neighbouring country such as Nepal for a brief stay before returning.

Now they will still face the same 180-day deadline, but will have to stay out of the

country for two months before they can re-enter.

"We have changed the rules to prevent the misuse of the long-term tourist visa," a senior official at the foreign ministry told AFP, asking not be named.

The new rules have been implemented since November 4, he said, although the British and the US embassies in New Delhi said the changes were being applied inconsistently and had caused problems for a number of its nationals.

In a posting on its website, the US embassy detailed a number of tourists who had

left the country to visit a neighbouring country for a holiday but who were then denied entry back into India.

"These new visa and registration regulations are being implemented inconsistently and are not finalised," the US advisory stated.

Over 100,000 tourists apply for long-term visas each year, according to the foreign ministry.

The British embassy said they were aware of the new visa rule and have discussed the issue with Indian authorities as it will impact a large number of British nationals.

Arms-carrying plane headed for Sri Lanka

AP, Bangkok

The mystery of an aircraft seized in Thailand with a cache of North Korean weapons deepened further Wednesday when a senior Thai police officer said it was not headed to Iran as some reports have indicated.

The five-man crew charged with illegal arms possession also insisted their destination was Sri Lanka and not Iran when it was seized in the Thai capital where it made a refuelling stop, their lawyer said Wednesday.

Defence lawyer Somsak Saithong told the Associated Press shortly after visiting the jailed crew that they also denied any knowledge of accused international weapons trafficker Victor Bout, who is in the same prison battling attempts to be extradited to the United States on terrorism charges.

There has been much speculation since it was impounded Dec. 12 about where the plane was headed and whether it was linked to Bout.

India seeks 'negotiations' with Maoist rebels

A dozen terror plots foiled, says Chidambaram

BBC ONLINE, AFP, New Delhi

India's federal home minister has said he is ready for "serious negotiations" with Maoist rebels. P Chidambaram said the rebels were not "terrorists" and had raised "serious issues" about the lack of development.

Earlier the home minister said Wednesday that a dozen or more plots to stage major attacks on the scale of the

Mumbai atrocities of last year had been foiled during 2009.

"Twelve to 13 terror attacks were neutralised in 2009 which could have been like Mumbai," P Chidambaram told an intelligence services event in New Delhi as he unveiled sweeping plans to upgrade national security.

Chidambaram did not elaborate on where the attacks were to occur or how they were

thwarted but attributed the incident-free past 12 months to "luck and better intelligence".

Last month, the minister said security forces were getting ready to launch a massive offensive against the rebels.

The rebels are fighting for communist rule in many Indian states. More than 6,000 people have died during the rebels' 20-year fight.

Nepali Maoists demand national unity govt

Prachanda accuses India of meddling in internal affairs

AFP, ANI, Kathmandu

Nepal's opposition Maoists on Tuesday set a one-month deadline for the formation of a national unity government and vowed to launch an indefinite strike if their demand was not met.

The ultra-leftists won elections last year, after they ended their deadly "People's War" which claimed 16,000 lives, but quit the government in May over a row with the country's first president about the sacking of the army chief.

"If our demands for a national government and restoration of civilian supremacy are not fulfilled by the deadline (of January 24), we will go for an indefinite general strike the next day," said Maoist leader Prachanda.

Prachanda, who goes by a

nom de guerre meaning "fierce one" although his real name is Pushpa Kamal Dahal, has previously spoken of a need for a national unity administration but has never set a deadline.

"We are giving a month's time to the government and political parties to consider our demands," Prachanda told cheering supporters in the capital.

Earlier 'Prachanda' has accused India of meddling in Nepal's affairs.

Addressing a victory rally to wrap up a three-day nationwide general strike here on Tuesday, Prachanda accused the Indian Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor of opposing the merger of the Maoist People's Liberation Army with the Nepal Army.

Nepal's Army Chief

General Chhatraman Singh Gurung was in India at the invitation of General Deepak Kapoor last week to receive traditional honour of being declared General of the Indian Army by the Indian President.

During the visit, General Kapoor was said to have stated that he was against the merger of the Maoists' People's Liberation Army with the Nepal Army as it would lead to the politicisation of the Nepal Army.

"Who has given the right to Indian army chief to direct Nepal to not recruit Maoists into Nepalese Army?" Prachanda asked.

Linking the Indian army chief's statement to Nepal's sovereignty, Prachanda said that he would only talk to authorities in New Delhi and not to those in Kathmandu.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Obamas vaccinated against H1N1 flu

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama said Tuesday he and his wife, Michelle, have been vaccinated against the A(H1N1) flu virus, urging other Americans to do the same.

"People need to understand that this vaccine is safe," Obama told Urban Radio Networks.

"Michelle and I just got the shots ourselves... we wanted to make sure nationwide that children were getting it before adults did. And now there's enough vaccine so that adults should get it as well."

PM, Sonia among 4 to get D Lit

ANI, Aligarh

The Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) will award D Lit (Honoris-causa) degrees to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Congress President Sonia Gandhi, painter M F Hussain and former Chief Justice of India A M Ahmedi for their outstanding contribution in their respective fields. "The degrees will be awarded to these personalities at the forthcoming annual convention of the university, date of which will be announced soon," an AMU release said today.

The decision to honour them was taken at a special meeting of the university's executive council held yesterday, it said.

Russia to send monkey to Mars

ANI, Moscow

Russian scientists have revealed that a monkey may be sent to Mars.

According to reports, Russia's Cosmonautics Academy is in preliminary talks with the Institute of Experimental Pathology and Therapy in Georgia, which supplied apes for a similar programme in the 1980s.



King of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (L) shakes hands with Chairperson of the Congress-led UPA Government Sonia Gandhi ahead of a meeting at Sonia Gandhi's residence in New Delhi on Tuesday. Wangchuck is in India for a six-day state visit.

India, Bhutan ink 12 accords

ANI, New Delhi

India and Bhutan on Tuesday inked a dozen agreements, including four on hydropower generation, after Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck held extensive talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The other agreements were in civil aviation, health and IT fields.

The Indian signatories included Foreign Minister S M Krishna and the Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao among others.

Earlier Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck met with the Indian leadership here on Tuesday.

Wangchuck, who is on a weeklong visit to India, held talks with President Pratibha Patil, Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi and opposition leader Sushma Swaraj.

JHARKHAND POLLS

Both Congress, BJP vying for JMM's support

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Ranchi

The Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were Wednesday morning vying for the support of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), which emerged the key to government formation following the messy, fractured electoral verdict that gave no clear leads to any political grouping.

Latest results and trends indicated that the Congress-Jharkhand Vikas Morcha-Prajatantrik (JVM-P) combine and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led alliance will get 22 to 26 seats and JMM will be close behind with 16 to 19 seats in the 81-member assembly. "It is high time that secular forces

unite," said union Food Processing Minister and Congress MP Subodh Kant Sahay.

K Keshav Rao of the Congress, who is in charge of the party's affairs in Jharkhand, also said he would be talking to Soren.

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance admitted it would not be able to form the government on its own and said candidly that 'no one is untouchable'.

"No one is an untouchable for us. We are ready for an alliance government with the support of other parties," state BJP president Raghubar Das told IANS.

Asked about seeking or lending support to the JMM, he said, "We are open for an alli-

ance. What would be the form of alliance with any party would be decided after the final results."

The BJP had contested for 67 seats and partner Janata Dal-United (JD-U) 14. While the BJP won or was leading in 22 seats, the JD-U was ahead only in two. This prompted BJP leaders to blame the JD-U for poor performance.

The Congress and the JVM-P contested for 61 and 20 seats respectively and went for a friendly fight in five constituencies. The Congress is leading or won 16 seats, seven more than in 2005 poll, and JVM-P nine seats.

The JRD, which is anxious to play a key role in government formation, is ahead in nine seats, two more than it had in the 2005 assembly poll.

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