



Pakistani shopkeepers look at the burning market after it was set on fire by angry protesters following a suicide blast during Ashura procession in Karachi on Monday. Shia Muslims gather at the blast site after the religious procession was bombed killing 43 people (Inset).



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan civilian casualties up 10 percent: UN

AFP, Kabul

Civilian deaths in Afghanistan rose more than 10 percent in the first 10 months of 2009, UN figures showed yesterday, amid anger over the alleged killing of children in a Western military operation.

Figures released to AFP by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) put civilian deaths in the Afghan war at 2,038 for the first 10 months of 2009, up from 1,838 for the same period of 2008 -- an increase of 10.8 percent.

The figures were released a day after President Hamid Karzai launched an investigation into reports that 10 people, most of them school children, were killed in a raid by foreign troops near the Pakistan border.

The UN calculations show the vast majority, or 1,404 civilians, were killed by insurgents fighting for the overthrow of Karzai's government and to eject Western troops.

UNAMA said 468 deaths were caused by pro-government forces, including NATO and US-led forces, and 166

by "other actors".

Civilian deaths at the hands of foreign forces fuel distrust between the Afghan population, the government and US and NATO troops, even though most of the deaths are caused by insurgent tactics such as home-made bombs.

In 2008, a total of 2,118 civilians were killed in the crossfire, the highest such toll since the 2001 US-led invasion removed the Taliban from power and sparked a fierce insurgency by remnants of the regime.

The war blighting Afghanistan is now into a ninth year and has escalated through 2009 as more international troops have been injected into the theatre, leading to more battles with Taliban-led militants.

More than 110,000 foreign troops are battling the insurgency, under US and NATO command, with that figure set to rise to around 150,000 by late 2010 with the arrival of another 30,000 US and 6,800 NATO troops.

The Taliban are increasingly relying on homemade bombs,

which exact a horrific toll on civilians and military alike, with foreign troop deaths at a record 507 this year.

Militant leaders rarely claim responsibility for incidents that kill large numbers of civilians, but frequently fan anger by using the civilian casualties as propaganda to sway local opinion against the foreign military presence.

US General Stanley McChrystal, who commands the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, has made it a central tenet of his new strategy that civilian casualties should be minimised.

On Saturday in eastern Kunar province, a raid by Western forces is reported to have killed 10 civilians, eight of them school children, Afghan officials said, prompting an outcry from Karzai.

The circumstances surrounding the incident remained unclear with NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) saying they had no knowledge of civilian deaths in Kunar, but Karzai vowed an investigation.

TIGHTENING OF INDIAN VISA NORMS Tweeting minister upsets boss

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor has upset his senior SM Krishna by questioning tightening of Indian visa norms by tweeting on the micro-blogging site Twitter.

Writing in his account in Twitter, Tharoor questioned the recent tightening of Indian visa rules in the backdrop of the controversy over American terror suspect David Coleman Headley, arrested on the charge of plotting attacks in India, being given tourist visa.

"26/11 (Mumbai terror attack on November 26, 2008) killers had no visa. Wondering whether the tightening of the visa norms for foreign nationals made sense at all and if it would actually protect security."

"Is all that worth it just in hope of making it difficult for a future Headley to re-see? R we going 2 allow terrorists 2 make us less welcoming?" Tharoor wrote in his Twitter account on Saturday.

The remarks by Tharoor came just days after the government, including the External Affairs Ministry, has already announced relaxation in the visa rules easing the two-month "cool-off" period for foreigners with multiple-entry long-term visas.

The relaxation was made last week to guidelines issued on November 4 this year which had required foreigners holding long-term multiple-entry visas to be out of India for two months before re-entering the country.

The relaxation was announced after the External Affairs Ministry had taken up the issue with the Home Ministry in the face of protests from a number of countries, including the United States and Britain.

Noting that visa arrangements were reciprocal, Tharoor said "the more restrictive we become, the tougher it will be for Indians to travel freely."

Cong govt capable of fighting terror: PM

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh Monday said the Congress government had the capacity to fight the challenges India is facing from terrorism, Maoist insurgency, communalism and regionalism.

"The country needs the Congress government and the Congress government at the centre is capable of fighting terrorism and Naxalism efficiently," Manmohan Singh said at a ceremony to lay the foundation stone of the party's headquarters here.

The Congress Monday began its yearlong celebrations to mark 125 years of its formation. The party will later

shift to the new headquarters, the Indira Gandhi Bhavan at Kotla Road, named after the late prime minister. Its headquarters since 1978 has been at 24, Akbar Road.

Manmohan Singh and party chief Sonia Gandhi laid the foundation stone of the Indira Gandhi Bhavan after hoisting the party flag.

The prime minister said the Congress was ready to accommodate all shades of opinion within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

"The Congress believes in the policies which unite and which are not divisive. Within the constitutional framework the Congress is prepared to accommodate all streams of thought," he said.

Iran steps up crackdown on opposition after protests

Nobel laureate's sister detained, Tehran blames West for fomenting unrest

AFP, AP, Tehran

Iran's conservative parliament called for maximum punishment of opposition demonstrators yesterday as the regime stepped up its crackdown on dissent arresting the sister of Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi.

She was detained along with dozens of journalists and activists, reports said, after eight people were killed in protests on Sunday during Shia rituals for Ashura. "Parliament wants the judiciary and intelligence bodies to arrest those who insult religion and impose the maximum punishment on them without reservation," said the statement read out by parliament speaker Ali Larijani on television.

Tehran is accusing Western countries of fomenting this week's violent protests in the capital and says it is summoning Britain's ambassador to file a complaint.

In Tehran on Tuesday, Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said the deadly clashes were the work of a tiny

minority. He accused outside countries, including the US and Britain, of "miscalculating" by siding with anti-government protesters. He did not directly address President Barack Obama's praise of the reformist movement.

Parliament also condemned "disgusting comments" by Western governments about Sunday's unrest, after they unanimously denounced the Islamic regime's deadly crackdown on protesters.

The MPs accused the protesters, who poured onto the streets in fresh anti-government demonstrations, of being "anti-religion" and "counter-revolutionaries."

But they took a softer stance towards opposition leaders, who reject President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's June reelection as fraudulent, urging them to distance themselves from the protests.

"We expect these gentlemen who had complaints in the election to wake up and clearly separate their path from this wicked movement, not to come out and issue statements again and make the air

dustier."

Eight people were killed as security forces used teargas, batons and eventually live rounds to push back thousands who had taken to the streets.

The nephew of opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi -- Ahmadinejad's main challenger in the disputed June election -- was shot dead in the demonstration. Mousavi's brother-in-law was again arrested on Sunday.

US President Barack Obama demanded on Monday that Iran free those protesters it had detained and told the opposition that history was on its side.

"The United States joins with the international community in strongly condemning the violent and unjust suppression of innocent Iranian citizens," Obama said in Hawaii where he is on holiday.

The MPs hit out at Obama over his "statement in favour of this group which committed anti-religion acts on Ashura" and said it was reminiscent of his predecessor George W. Bush.



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama (R) and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh walk in the Hyderabad House garden prior to a joint press conference in New Delhi yesterday. Hatoyama arrived in India on December 27 on a three-day visit aimed at strengthening economic and security co-operation with the emerging South Asian giant.

India, Japan launch new security talks Differences remain over CTBT

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

India and Japan yesterday launched an action plan to take their security dialogue, including counter-terrorism, to the 'next stage' and gave a push to a key economic pact. But a breakthrough in the critical civil nuclear area eluded them.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh held talks with his Japanese counterpart Yukio Hatoyama for over an hour on a range of bilateral, regional and global issues including enhanced trade and investment, upgrading security dialogue, UN reforms, terrorism, climate change and nuclear disarmament.

After their talks, the two leaders signed an ambitious joint declaration entitled 'New Stage of India-Japan Strategic and Global Partnership', which has an action plan on security cooperation as its centrepiece.

Prime Minister Hatoyama's visit has succeeded in taking our partnership to a new stage. This is reflected in the joint statement that we have just signed," Manmohan Singh said at a joint press conference with the Japanese leader.

The two countries pledged to cooperate in the area of universal nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation but differences over CTBT remained.

Party under a blue moon this New Year eve!

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Take out some time from New Year eve revelry Thursday and look at the sky to catch a glimpse of a rare celestial phenomenon - a blue moon.

A partial lunar eclipse will also be observed early Jan 1, 2010.

The full moon on Thursday will be a 'blue moon'.

A blue moon has nothing to do with the colour of the moon but when two full moons occur within the same month, the second full moon of the month is called a 'blue moon', a term used metaphorically to describe the rarity of an event, as in the idiomatic expression -- once in a blue moon.

"Most years have twelve full moons, but since a lunar cycle is 29.5 days, we wind up with almost 11 leftover days. Eventually the days add up, and we have two full moons in a single month -- like we do this month," said N Rathnasree, director of the Nehru Planetarium here.

Zardari threatens to 'gouge out evil eyes' of anti-democratic forces

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari has issued a brutal threat to anti-democratic forces of the country, saying that any "evil eye on democracy" will be "gouged out."

"If anyone casts an evil eye on democracy, we will gouge out their eyes. We have shed our blood for our institutions we know what happens when institutions clash and don't want that to happen," the Daily Times quoted Zardari, as saying.

Addressing a gathering to mark the second death anniversary of Benazir Bhutto, Zardari said that "conspiracies" were being "hatched against the four provinces and the federation but all will be foiled by the people of Pakistan".



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (R) and Nepal's Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal (C) inspect the Chinese People's Liberation Army honour guards during a welcome ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Nepal's premier is in China on a five-day official visit to strengthen relations.

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