



Activists of Pasban Pakistani along with Fowzia Siddiqui (C), sister of Pakistani woman Aafia Siddiqui, protest in Karachi against her detention on Saturday. US authorities say Siddiqui, 37, is an al-Qaeda-linked, would-be terrorist who tried to murder American officers on July 18, 2008, after she was detained by security services in Afghanistan.

PHOTO: AFP

Karzai appeals to Taliban to lay down arms

Interpreter kills 2 US soldiers

AP, AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's president appealed to Taliban fighters yesterday to put down their weapons and accept Afghan laws as the government and its international allies push a programme to entice militants away from the insurgency.

President Hamid Karzai three days after he and Western backers agreed at a conference in London to create a more comprehensive programme to bring Taliban insurgents over to the government's side in order to reduce violence that has raged in recent years.

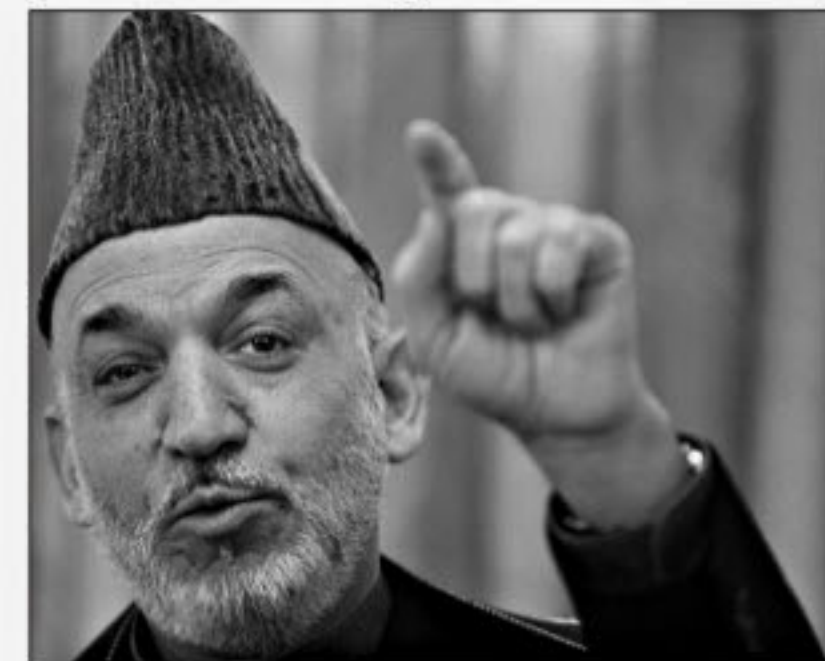
Incentives have existed for years for the Taliban to lay down their weapons, but these have generally been ineffective, attracting only the lowest-level fighters with no guarantees they wouldn't return to the insurgency.

Karzai stressed he plans to reconcile with Taliban leaders as much as they are willing, but he made clear his offer of reconciliation did not extend to anyone in al-Qaeda, saying there was no room in Afghanistan for terrorists.

"We are trying our best to reach as high as possible to bring peace and security," Karzai said in his first news conference

since returning from London.

Karzai has said previously he is willing to talk to Taliban leader Mullah Omar and welcome back any militants who are



President Hamid Karzai

willing to recognise the Afghan constitution. However, the Taliban has always set the withdrawal of international troops as a precondition for any negotiations.

Karzai called that unrealistic, saying the Nato coalition should be expected to stay until they achieve their goal of removing al-Qaeda and other terrorist threats.

Afghanistan's international backers agreed in London to provide funding for a renewed effort to woo Taliban away from

al-Qaeda and the insurgency, given the commitment of the Afghan government to institute a more comprehensive and thorough programme, including jobs and education.

Earlier an Afghan interpreter working for the US military has shot dead two American soldiers in Afghanistan, an officer with Nato forces said Saturday.

The officer, who asked not to be named, said the incident happened on Friday in Wardak province, near the capital Kabul, but could give no further details.

Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) said late on Friday that "two US servicemembers and one US employee were killed" in an incident in eastern Afghanistan that was being investigated.

An Isaf spokesman told AFP the "employee" was an American civilian but the Nato officer confirmed he was an Afghan national employed by the US military.

No other details were available, he said.

Incidents of Afghans attacking foreign troops are not common in Afghanistan, where 113,000 foreign troops are fighting a Taliban-led insurgency, with another 40,000 due to be deployed this year.

Taliban denies report of Mehsud's death

Pak army investigating report

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistani Taliban yesterday denied fresh rumours that their chief Hakimullah Mehsud is dead, while the army said it was investigating as reports re-emerged that he was killed by US drone missiles.

Speculation about the warlord's death first surfaced after a January 14 bombing by unmanned US spy planes in Taliban stronghold North Waziristan, but within days Mehsud released two audio statements denying his demise.

Security sources said at the time that he may have been wounded, and on Sunday local television stations carried a report that he had been buried.

"I don't have the confirmation, my sources have not confirmed it, whether he is dead or alive," chief military spokesman Major General Athar Abbas told AFP, adding that they were investigating the report.

Taliban spokesmen had earlier this month admitted that Mehsud was in the Shakto area where the drones hit, but said he left about an hour before the strike. US officials said they had no information about his reported death.

The chief Taliban spokesman again Sunday dismissed the reports.

Delhi to host India's first 'Newseum'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Delhi will have the country's first museum on news - Newseum!

"This is a first of its kind initiative. It is a unique idea. The Newseum, as we are calling it, will be on display from Monday," Banwari Lal, director of the Delhi Public Library (DPL), told IANS.

The initiative is part of the DPL's 60th year of existence and it has been painstakingly carved out of several libraries under the DPL.

"It will host rare archival collection of old newspapers from 1952 to 2009. It will explore patterns and moments in modern Indian history," Lal explained.

'Afghan mineral, petroleum reserves worth trillion dollars'

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan, one of the world's poorest countries, is sitting on mineral and petroleum reserves worth an estimated one trillion dollars, President Hamid Karzai said yesterday.

The war-ravaged nation could become one of the richest in the world if helped to tap its geological deposits, Karzai told reporters.

"I have very good news for Afghans," Karzai said. "The initial figures we have obtained show that our mineral deposits are worth a thousand billion dollars -- not a thousand million dollars but a thousand billion," he said.

He based his assertion, he said, on a survey being carried out by the United States Geological Survey (USGS), due to be completed in "a couple of months".

The USGS, the US government's scientific agency, has been working on the 17-million dollar survey for a number of years, Karzai said.

While Afghanistan is not renowned as a resource-rich country, it has a wide range of deposits, including copper, iron ore, gold and chromite, as well as natural gas, oil and precious and semi-precious stones.

Little has been exploited because the country has been mired in conflict for 30 years, and is embroiled in a vicious insurgency by Islamist rebels led by the Taliban.



Indian paramilitary soldiers and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel arrive at Hatia Railway Station in Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand state yesterday during the launch of 'Operation Green Hunt' against Maoist groups. The anti-insurgency operation began as the Maoist uprising has now spread to 20 of India's 29 states.

PHOTO: AFP



Kashmiri villagers clear the debris in a house damaged during an encounter between Muslim militants and security forces in Sopore, 55km north of Srinagar yesterday. The residential house was damaged in the gun battle.

PHOTO: AFP

Fighter jets pound NW Pakistan, bomb kills 2

AFP, Peshawar

Fighter jets and helicopters yesterday pounded a district in northwest Pakistan where a suicide bomber killed 17 people a day earlier, in a response described by authorities as "severe".

It came as two security personnel were killed by another bomb on Sunday.

Saturday's suicide blast in the town of Khar was the latest in a string of attacks in Bajaur district, which borders Afghanistan. Senior administrative official Iqbal Khatak said the death toll had risen overnight to 17, with 46 injured.

Two soldiers were among the dead in the attack on a military checkpoint.

Authorities imposed an indefinite curfew in Khar, Bajaur's main town, and adjoining villages, while all major roads were closed.

"Fighter jets and helicopter gunships are bombing and shelling militant hideouts and bases in Mamoond and Salarzai," administrative official Jameel Khan said, referring to two towns within 15 kilometres (nine miles) of Khar.

"Ground troops are also taking part in this offensive."

A security official in the area confirmed the

"severe" air strikes.

"There are training centres where militants trained suicide bombers and they have hideouts in these areas," he said. "We are going to clear these areas. Militants are taking shelter there."

In neighbouring Mohmand district on Sunday a roadside bomb exploded in the town of Safi, killing two security personnel who were riding in a water tanker, officials and residents told AFP.

"The remote-controlled bomb was buried in Safi town -- two security men were martyred and two injured in this incident," said Major Fazal-ur-Rehman, spokesman for the paramilitary Frontier Corps.

Bajaur and Mohmand sit at the northern tip of Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal belt along the Afghan border. They have seen increasing unrest in recent weeks as security forces try to dismantle Taliban sanctuaries.

The military first launched operations against Islamist fighters in Mohmand and Bajaur in August 2008 and have claimed several times to have quashed the militant threat, but clashes and attacks continue.

Rajapakse transfers senior military officers loyal to Fonseka

Editor detained for backing opposition

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has transferred several senior military officers loyal to the former army general who he defeated in elections, a military source said yesterday.

Rajapakse ordered a shake-up of the military to remove Sarath Fonseka's supporters from key roles after Fonseka's failed bid to win the presidency in Tuesday's vote, the official said on condition of anonymity.

"Several seniors who were very close to General Fonseka have been removed from sensitive positions," he said.

Army spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara confirmed the transfers, including the removal of a top major general who was given an administrative job, but he declined to explain the moves.

Rajapakse's government had accused Fonseka of planning a coup in the event of losing the election.

Police raided Fonseka's political headquarters on Friday and arrested several retired army officers who had been working for him.

Earlier media groups in Sri Lanka on Sunday accused the government of detaining a senior editor and shutting down his newspaper because the publication backed the losing opposition candidate in elections.

Press owners, editors and rights bodies issued a joint statement saying the closure of the pro-opposition Lanka weekly and the detention of Chandana Sirimalwatte was a "fatal blow to media freedom and democracy."

US beefs up defence of Persian Gulf allies

AP, Washington

The United States has begun beefing up its approach to defending its Persian Gulf allies against potential Iranian missile strikes, officials say. The defenses are being stepped up in advance of the possible increased sanctions against Iran.

The Obama administration has quietly increased the capability of land-based Patriot defensive missiles in several Gulf Arab nations, and one military official said the Navy is increasing the presence of ships capable of knocking out hostile missiles in flight.

The officials discussed aspects of the defensive strategy Saturday on condition of anonymity because some elements are classified.

The moves, part of a broader adjustment in the US approach to missile defence, including in Europe and Asia have been in the works for months. Details have not been publicly announced, in part because of diplomatic sensitivities in Gulf countries, which worry about Iranian military capabilities but are cautious about acknowledging US protection.

The White House will send a review of ballistic missile strategy to Congress on Monday that frames the larger shifts. Attention to defence of the Persian Gulf region, a focus on diffuse networks of sensors and weapons and cooperation with Russia are major elements of the study, according to documents obtained by The

Associated Press.

Russia opposed Bush administration plans for a land-based missile defence site in Eastern Europe, and President Barack Obama's decision to walk away from that plan last year was partly in pursuit of new capabilities that might hold greater promise and partly in deference to Russia.

One military official said the adjustments in the Gulf should be seen as prudent defensive measures designed to deter Iran from taking aggressive action in the region, more than as a signal that Washington expects Iran to retaliate for any additional sanctions.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton consulted with numerous allies during a visit to London this week. She told reporters that the negoti failure of US offers to engage Iran in negotiations over its nuclear programme means the US will now press for additional sanctions against the Iranian government.

Gen. David Petraeus, the US Central Command chief who is responsible for US military operations across the Middle East, mentioned in several recent public speeches one element of the defensive strategy in the Gulf: upgrading Patriot missile systems, which originally were deployed in the region to shoot down aircraft but now can hit missiles in flight.

In remarks at Georgetown Law School on Jan. 21, Petraeus said the US now has eight Patriot missile batteries stationed in the Gulf region two each in four countries. He did not name the countries, but Kuwait has long been known to have Patriots on its territory.

Maharani's heirs fight govt for 800kg gold

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

The heirs of Maharani Gayatri Devi of the erstwhile Jaipur royal family, considered the wealthiest royalty of Rajasthan, have approached the Delhi High Court for getting back nearly 800 kg of gold seized by the government in 1975. The gold, listed as the private property of Gayatri Devi's husband, the late Maharaja Sawai Man Singh, was seized by the Income Tax (IT) department as the family had not declared it to the authorities as stipulated by the Gold Control Act, 1968. The act has now been repealed.

Gayatri Devi died July 29 last year.

Challenging the Gold Control Administrator's (Delhi) 1980 order, Man Singh's successor and eldest son Brig (ret'd) Sawai Bhawani Singh, in his petition, contended: "There was no reason for us to believe that the entire gold had not been declared under the Gold Control Act."



A woman stands next to the rubble of her collapsed home in Suining yesterday in southwest China's Sichuan province following an early morning moderate earthquake. A moderate 5.0 quake struck southwestern China, killing one person, injuring at least 11 others and damaging 100 homes.

PHOTO: AFP