

Taliban talks halted by arrests in Pakistan

Says ex-UN envoy

AP, Kabul

The arrests of top Taliban figures in Pakistan abruptly halted secret UN contacts with the insurgency at a time when the efforts were gaining momentum, the UN's former envoy to Afghanistan said yesterday.

Kai Eide, a Norwegian diplomat who just stepped down from the UN post here in the Afghan capital, said the discussions that he and others from the UN had with senior Taliban members began in the spring of 2009 and included face-to-face conversations in Dubai and elsewhere.

He criticised Pakistan for arresting the Taliban's No. 2 and other members of the insurgency, saying the Pakistanis surely knew the roles these figures had in efforts to find a political resolution to the 8-year-old war. Pakistan denies the arrests were linked to reconciliation talks.

"There was an increase in intensity of contacts, but this process came to a halt following the arrests that took place in Pakistan," Eide told The Associated Press in a telephone interview from his home outside Oslo.

Last month's detention of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar second in the Taliban only to Mullah Mohammed Omar infuriated Afghan President Hamid Karzai, one of Karzai's advisers told the AP. Besides the ongoing talks, the adviser, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive topic, said Baradar had "given a green light" to participating in a three-day peace "jirga" or conference that Karzai is hosting next month.

However, Gen. Athar Abbas, a spokesman for the Pakistani military, said Friday that Baradar's arrest, which he said was a joint operation with the US, was not connected to any peace talks. "Reconciliation or talks have nothing to do with the arrest of Baradar," he said. "It has nothing to do with the talks. Serious arrests are being made continuously."

Eide, whose comments were first reported on Friday by the BBC, said there was a lull in contacts between the UN and the insurgents around last summer's Afghan presidential election, but then they intensified.

"It's quite clear that the level of contact was increasing over the last few

months to one point and that's when you had the number of arrests in Pakistan," he said.

Eide said there were many channels of communication with the Taliban, including those involving Karzai's representative. Eide said the negotiations must be led by the Afghans, but that contacts have been made by other parties.

"I know many have tried," he said, declining to identify those who have reached out to the Taliban.

Eide said the UN had met senior figures in the Taliban leadership as well as people who have the authority from the Quetta Shura to engage in such discussions. Named after a city in Pakistan, the Quetta Shura is the ruling council of the Taliban.

He said he believed that the talks, which he said were still in the early stages, could not have taken place without the blessing of Omar, the Taliban leader. "I cannot say with certainty, but I'm pretty sure," Eide said. "I find it hard to believe that these contacts could take place without his knowledge."



A demonstrator hurls a tear gas shell back towards Pakistani riot police during clashes at the main intersection linking Rawalpindi and Islamabad yesterday. Hundreds of protesters continued demonstrations on the second day against hikes in public transport fares in Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

PHOTO: AFP



Red-shirted supporters of deposed Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra rest early yesterday in Bangkok. Thailand's rural underclass, vying to revive flagging momentum after a week of colourful protests, appealed Thursday for a popular uprising against the well-entrenched political and aristocratic elite.

PHOTO: AFP

Thai protesters to gridlock capital with travelling rally

AFP, Bangkok

Thai anti-government protesters announced plans yesterday to snarl up the capital with a travelling rally in a bid to win support after rejecting a conditional offer of talks by the prime minister.

Military officials expect up to 30,000 "Red Shirts" to arrive in Bangkok from the provinces on Saturday to join the convoy across the capital as the movement seeks to revive its flagging campaign for snap elections.

The group rallied for a sixth day in support of deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, with protest leaders vowing to reject negotiations until the dissolution of parliament's lower house.

"The Red Shirts are not refusing to negotiate but the prime minister has to dissolve the house first and all parties have to sign a pact saying they will respect the result of elections so the country can move ahead," Red Shirt leader Jatuporn Prompan told the crowd.

The Reds plan to zig-zag along 45km of Bangkok's main roads, asking residents to join them.

Deputy prime minister Suthep Thaugsuban said the protest could go ahead but warned demonstrators not to block traffic.

"The government will not interfere with their legal right to protest, but they must not block roads or intersections, or the government will not consider it a peaceful protest," he said.

"The protesters must be aware that people may not agree with them and boo them."

He said the convoy would be banned from entering a two-kilometre radius around the Bangkok hospital where the country's revered king has been staying since September.

He said the government would also consider extending the area covered by a strict security law that has been enacted for the protests, enabling the deployment of a 50,000-strong force of soldiers and police.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said he had not been able to return home since the rally began, as he and other members of his army-backed government have been holed up at a barracks due to security fears.

But the premier stood firm in his rejection of the protesters' demand, and said talks could only take place once the rally had dispersed.

India has reduced 35,000 troops in Kashmir

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Jammu

Without much fanfare, India has withdrawn over 35,000 troops from Jammu and Kashmir. More troops are expected to be withdrawn soon.

Over 35,000 troops have been reduced in Jammu and Kashmir in the past 15 months, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah told the state legislative assembly. He promised a further decline in the number of troops.

"Without creating any hype we have reduced 35,000 troops and also decreased the number of central paramilitary forces from internal duty," Abdullah said Wednesday evening.

The main opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and separatists in the state have been consistently campaigning for troop reduction as they believe that the presence of the army in Kashmir was intruding into the day-to-day lives of the people and was also responsible for human rights abuses.

Abdullah's National Conference is also of the view that an improvement in the security situation necessitates reduction of troops in the Valley.

However, the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) is opposed to the move. BJP legislature party leader Chaman Lal Gupta told the assembly that the reduction of troops would only encourage the militants. "It will encourage militants to regroup and worsen the situation," he said.

"With the gradual restoration of peace and tranquillity, the footprints of the security forces in the state would lessen," he said.

Headley's confession may help nail Pakistan: BJP

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Lashkar-e-Taiba operative David Headley's confession about his involvement in the Mumbai terror attack would add weight to New Delhi's claims of Pakistan's involvement in terrorist acts against India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) said yesterday.

"It will be very clear to the world community that Pakistan is involved in the terror attacks against India after Headley has pleaded guilty to 26/11," BJP spokesperson Prakash Javadekar told IANS.

He said though the confessional statement of the Pakistan-born American had ruled out the possibility of his extradition to India, "there are still chances that (Indian investigators can question) him."

"We cannot get him extradited. But we can get access to him to question him. The dossiers (India has given to Pakistan about terrorists operating from its soil) will be more weighty," the BJP leader said.

Central forces in Orissa for anti-Maoist operation

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Bhubaneswar

About 500 Border Security Force (BSF) personnel have reached Orissa to hunt down Maoist guerrillas, an official said yesterday.

The BSF men reached Koraput district Thursday. The BSF will team up with the police for a joint operation likely to start next month.

"We are awaiting the arrival of more forces," Inspector General of Police (Operation) Sanjeev Marik told IANS. The details of the operation would be chalked out after reinforcements come, he said.

Jharkhand and West Bengal, both of which border Orissa, are engaged in a sweeping crackdown on the outlawed Communist Party of India-Maoist.

Musharraf's new political party closer to reality, but will he return?

ANI, Islamabad

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has reportedly accepted former President General Pervez Musharraf's application to register a new political party named All Pakistan Muslim League (APML), thus clearing the road for Musharraf to return to the country for another political stint.

Sources privy to the development said Musharraf was trying hard to register the party through some of his loyalists in the country for quite some time, and has now finally succeeded.

Sources said the application filed by the ECP named some of the office-bearers of APML such as Barrister Saif as Chairman, Sher Alam Khattak as President, Chuadry Abdul Ghafoor as Senior Vice President, and Rai Mulazam Hussain as Secretary General.

Commenting on the reports regarding Musharraf staging a comeback, Major General (retired) Rashid Qureshi, while confirming that Barrister Saif was serving as a legal advisor and spokesman of Musharraf, said the former premier has still not decided to join the newly floated party.

Qureshi said though Musharraf enjoys huge public support, he is unlikely to join the APML in the coming days.

"Musharraf has not yet decided to join the party and is waiting for right time to join Pakistani politics.

There are 155,000 members of Pasdaran-e-Pakistan and 150,000 lovers on face book. Its shows how much popular he is in the masses," The Nation quoted Qureshi, as saying.

Scientists turn mosquito into 'flying vaccinator'

ANI, Washington

A team of Japanese researchers has developed a mosquito that spreads vaccine instead of disease.

The new research, led by Associate Professor Shigeto Yoshida from the Jichi Medical University in Japan, has revealed that mosquito genetic engineering can turn the transmitter into a natural 'flying vaccinator', providing a new strategy for biological control over the disease.

The study targets the saliva gland of the Anopheles stephensi mosquitoes, the main vectors of human malaria. "Blood-sucking arthropods including mosquitoes, sand flies and ticks transmit numerous infectious agents during blood feeding," said Yoshida.

"This includes malaria, which kills between 1-2 million people, mostly African children, a year. The lack of an effective vaccine means control of the carrier has become a crucial objective to combating the disease," Yoshida added.

For the past decade, it has been theorized that genetic engineering of the mosquito could create a 'flying vaccinator', raising hopes for their use as a new strategy for malaria control.

However so far research has been limited to a study of the insect's gut and the 'flying vaccinator' theory was not developed.

"Following bites, protective immune responses are induced, just like a conventional vaccination but with no pain and no cost. What's more continuous exposure to bites will maintain high levels of protective immunity, through natural boosting, for a lifetime. So the insect shifts from being a pest to being beneficial," said Yoshida.



Afghan boys work on their farm as their father (C) answers questions to US Marines of 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines, during a 24-hour foot operation in a poppy field area in Marjah, Helmand province, southern Afghanistan on Thursday. A total of 60 farms were searched and nothing suspected was found.

PHOTO: AFP

Siddhirganj power

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can be offered the job.

In response, EGCB representatives at the meeting said the WB raised the issue after completion of tender evaluation in July last year. The bid drew eight offers, and four of those were rejected due to major deviations. After detailed analysis, three out of the remaining four were found non-responsive. This left the EGCB with only one responsive tender.

The EGCB now has no alternative but to award the contract to the lowest bidder, and the WB should waive the issue of Siemens machinery, they said.

An official of the Economic Relations Division (ERD) present at the meeting said awarding the job to the second lowest bidder would create legal complications. She noted that if the EGCB goes for a fresh tender it would also be a time consuming process, and create scope for the lowest bidder to resort to court.

The meeting concluded with the WB local office's suggestion that the power division could write to the WB authorities asking for waiver on Siemens machinery.

Power Secretary Abul Kalam Azad told The Daily Star that he has requested the ERD to write to the WB Headquarters to review its decision on the issue against the backdrop of Bangladesh's on-going power crisis.

"They will understand the matter," the secretary said. Refraining from participating in WB's agreement with Siemens to draw from attention to the project's financed by it till the end of this year, he said, "Siemens has not withdrawn from any tender anywhere in the world."

The project is being delayed, and the government expects a positive response from the WB, said the secretary.

The EGCB's tender drew eight bids from four Chinese power companies, an Indian company and an Indo-German joint venture company, a Korean firm and a Spanish company. The read-out price offers of these companies ranged between \$180 million and \$270 m.

China's help sought for deep-sea port

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Replying to a question, Hasina informed the Chinese business leaders that her government is promoting public-private partnership for maximum flourishing of economy, trade and commerce.

"Bangladesh will be happy if Chinese entrepreneurs come forward and utilise the scopes of public-private partnership by making investment in Bangladesh," she said.

Hasina informed the Chinese entrepreneurs about the facilities and incentives being offered by Bangladesh for attracting foreign investments.

She said Bangladesh offers immense investment potentials with high return for investors. The investment climate has been made attractive with liberal and fiscal financial policies.

She mentioned about tax holiday, concessionary duty on imported machinery, avoidance of double taxation, remittance of royalty, technical know-how, technical assistance fee, allowing 100% foreign equity, unrestricted exit policy and full repatriation facilities of dividend and capital on exit.

Moreover, the PM said

added attractions for foreign investment are the market of \$150 million, labour at competitive cost, presence of home-grown entrepreneurs class, existence of a strong legal regime and GSP facilities in Europe and North America.

In reply to power crisis in Bangladesh, Hasina assured the Chinese investors of uninterrupted power supply for production.

She said urged to invest in power sector and her government is taking measures for gas exploration.

The government is also considering to increase power generation through setting up coal-based power plant, she added.

Hasina told the Chinese entrepreneurs that measures are being taken to generate power through hydroelectricity, wind power plant and solar energy panel.

She said to facilitate Chinese investment in Bangladesh, China has already signed Agreement on Investment Promotion and Protection and Agreement for Avoidance of Double Taxation.

As on January 2010, 186 Chinese investment proposals

worth \$320 million have been registered with the Board of Investment.

The Bangladesh premier said at present, 55 Chinese enterprises with proposed investment of \$292 million has been invested creating job for over 45,000 Bangladeshis.

Hasina described China as an economic power that is reckoned with saying that it has solidly weathered the recent worldwide recession, and also helped the world pull out of the crisis.

To encourage imports from Bangladesh, on July 2006, China declared zero tariff access for 84 Bangladeshi items, and preferential access under Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement, Hasina noted.

At the function, the prime minister was presented with books and portrait of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Director of the Chinese Council for International Trade Zhang Wei also spoke at the meeting.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, Industries Minister Dilip Barua and Communication Minister Syed Abul Hossain, among others were present.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian leader of opposition and senior leader of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Shushma Swaraj leaves after a meeting with Singaporean senior minister Goh Chok Tong (L) in New Delhi yesterday. Tong is in India for a three-day visit where he will address delegates at The 20th Asian Corporate Conference today.