

Obama presses Karzai on graft purge

Afghanistan seeks arrest of ex-minister

AFP, Kabul



US President Barack Obama (L) visits troops in the Dragon dining facility at Bagram Air Base on Sunday. Obama thanked the Afghan people and US troops for their sacrifices in the war in Afghanistan, and vowed to reverse the Taliban's momentum. PHOTO: AFP

US president asks troops to defeat Taliban in surprise Kabul visit

AFP, Kabul

US President Barack Obama pressed Afghan leader Hamid Karzai to show progress in cleaning up corruption and rallied troops to defeat the Taliban during a surprise night-time visit to Afghanistan.

Obama flew into Afghanistan under the cover of darkness aboard Air Force One and left before dawn Monday for his first visit to the country since taking office more than a year ago.

The war against the Taliban, now in its ninth year, is claiming record fatalities among the 121,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, where Obama is deploying reinforcements in an effort to bring the long war to an end.

The visit -- which included briefings with US General Stanley McChrystal, commander of foreign troops, and US ambassador Karl Eikenberry -- gave the president the chance to assess the progress of his new war strategy.

"We are here to help Afghans forge a hard-won peace while realising the extraordinary potential of the Afghan people," the US commander-in-chief said in a rousing speech to US and Nato troops at Bagram Airfield outside Kabul.

"We're going to deny al-Qaeda safe haven. We're going to reverse the Taliban's momentum," said Obama.

He pressed Karzai, returned for a second

five-year term in fraud-riddled elections last year, to step up the fight against corruption and the drugs trade, and invited the Afghan leader to visit Washington on May 12.

Karzai has pledged action against corruption, which infects every aspect of life in Afghanistan, as well as good governance and rule of law.

Obama, whose relationship with Karzai has been strained, urged his Afghan counterpart to "continue to make progress" on all fronts.

The visit sent a clear message to Karzai that Obama expects him to act on promises to eradicate graft before visiting Washington but is deeply committed to reversing the Taliban insurgency, Afghan analysts said.

"Obama has set some homework for Karzai, reminding him that the anti-corruption issue must be taken more seriously and that not enough has been done so far," analyst Waheed Mujda told AFP.

The US president has put his personal stamp on what he calls a "war of necessity" in Afghanistan, ordering more than 50,000 extra troops to the country to bring the total foreign deployment to 150,000 by August.

"It was a strong message to President Karzai and his administration that the US cannot remain indifferent to the internal politics in Afghanistan," said Haroun Mir, director of Afghanistan's Centre for Research and Policy Studies.

Afghan authorities have issued an arrest warrant for a former minister accused of corruption and are seeking his extradition from Britain following reports of his detention, a prosecutor said.

Mohammad Siddiq Chakari, a former minister for hajj and religious affairs, is accused of taking bribes from a foreign catering company during last year's Muslim pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan's deputy attorney general Fazil Ahmad Faqiryar told AFP.

If confirmed, it would be the highest profile arrest in Afghanistan's efforts to fight graft, with the attorney general's office saying to 17 ministers are under investigation for alleged involvement in corruption.

The warrant against Chakari was issued after he defied an order not to leave the country without permission, Faqiryar said.

No major pullout from Kashmir: Army

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Jammu

There has been no major withdrawal of troops from Jammu and Kashmir, an Indian Army officer said yesterday.

Answering a question about withdrawal of troops at a media conference, Brig Gurdip Singh, the Brigadier General Staff (BGS) of 16 Corps, headquartered at Nagrota on the outskirts of Jammu, said: "It is only relocation and redeployment of troops that is going on from certain places where other police organisations must take on a share. There is no major pullout (of troops)."

Defence Minister AK Antony, Home Minister P Chidambaram and the state government have maintained that about 35,000 army troops were withdrawn from Jammu and Kashmir over a period of one year in 2009.

Gurdip Singh said that there were an estimated 200-250 militants across the Line of Control (LoC) in the Jammu region, south of Pir Panjal, waiting to infiltrate into India. "Troops are on high alert to prevent this and proper surveillance equipments are in place along the LOC," he said, adding there was no infiltration of militants from Pakistan into Jammu region this year.

The Jammu region has 220 km of International Border (IB) with Pakistan from Kathua - the gateway to Jammu and Kashmir, up to Akhnoor and beyond that is the LOC that extends up to Ladakh through Kashmir valley.

Referring to use of satellite phones by militants, Gurdip Singh said the equipment had to be procured by someone and proper registration made before it could function. He indicated that Pakistan was procuring such satellite phones and passing them on to militants for communication purposes.

US steps up subway security after Moscow blasts

AFP, New York

US transit systems stepped up security yesterday after two apparent suicide bombings in Moscow's underground train system that killed at least 38 people.

The New York Police Department said there had been no specific threat against the city's subway, but that additional security had been put in place as a "precaution."

"In response to the Moscow bombings, the NYPD is increasing police coverage of the New York city subway system," police department spokesman Lieutenant John Grimpe said.

He would not give details of the new security measures, though past security boosts have included more uniformed officers, increased bag inspections and deployment of bomb-sniffing dogs.

In Washington, the US capital, Metro Transit Police bomb squads were to conduct "random station and rail yard sweeps" with bomb-sniffing dogs "throughout the day as part of heightened security."

"Locations of the station sweeps are not

being announced in advance. All of the Metro Transit Police officers will be on high visibility patrols throughout the day," a statement released by Metro said.

"When we opened the Metro system this morning, we did so with heightened security," said Metro Transit Police acting chief Jeri Lee. "We remain an open system and we do what we can to be as secure as possible."

Earlier Monday, two female suicide bombers blew themselves up on rush hour metro trains in Moscow, killing at least 37 people at stations close to the city's ex-KGB headquarters and Gorky Park.

Early indications suggested the attacks were the work of militant groups from the North Caucasus, a region populated mostly by non-Russian, Muslim ethnic groups, where Russia has fought several brutal anti-insurgency campaigns over the last two decades.

US authorities broke up a plot to bomb New York's subway system last year. A man who says he received training from al-Qaeda has pleaded guilty and is due to be sentenced in the case later this year.



Russian police and emergency workers stand guard outside the entrance to Park Kulturi metro station in Moscow yesterday after two explosions during the early morning rush hour in metro stations killed at least 38 people. PHOTO: AFP



'Red Shirt' supporters of ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra shout slogans during an anti-government protest in Bangkok yesterday. Red Shirt leaders met Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva for the second day of talks to press for elections following weeks of protests that have rocked Thailand's capital. PHOTO: AFP

Thai PM holds 2nd day of talks with Red Shirts

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said yesterday he was open to calling elections before his term ends but would not meet Red Shirts' 15-day deadline as they entered a second day of talks.

The televised negotiations are aimed at ending weeks of disruptive rallies in the Thai capital as the protesters, loyal to deposed premier Thaksin Shinawatra, press their demand for Abhisit to dissolve the lower house.

"If you reaffirm your demand I have no choice but to say it is impossible. I don't reject house dissolution but not today or in the next 15 days because I do not consider that it is a solution," Abhisit told the three Red leaders.

"If you want my government... to call an election before our term has ended, no problem. But we have to talk..." he said.

Polls are due in Thailand in December 2011. A first round of talks, held Sunday at a Bangkok educational institute, ended without breakthrough.

The Red Shirts, supported mainly by Thailand's poor rural population, first gathered two weeks ago in the capital's government quarter, laying open again the country's wide social chasm following months of rival street campaigns.

The red-dressed movement says the government is elitist and undemocratic because it came to power on the back of a parliamentary vote after a controversial court ruling ousted Thaksin's allies from power.

The Reds' populist political icon, former telecoms tycoon Thaksin, made one of his regular speeches by videolink following Sunday's talks, urging the thousands-strong rally to get behind the movement's leaders, who he admitted had been deflated following their face-to-face with the eloquent Abhisit.

17 Indians get death for killing of Pakistani in UAE

AFP, Dubai

Seventeen Indian nationals have been sentenced to death for killing a Pakistani man in a turf dispute between bootleg liquor gangs in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, local media reported yesterday.

The Pakistani man was beaten to death with metal bars in January 2009, while three others were injured in the attack, The National newspaper reported.

It said the dispute was between members of rival gangs vying to sell illegal liquor to labourers in the Al-Sajaa area of Sharjah.

The sentences marked the highest number of death penalties handed down at one time in the emirate, The National cited court officials as saying.

Big B, explain stand on 2002 riots: Cong

CNN-IBN, New Delhi

Congress yesterday once again targeted Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan for becoming the brand ambassador of Gujarat by asking him to clear his position on the 2002 communal carnage in the state.

"As a brand ambassador does he endorse or condemn the mass murder in Gujarat? It is high time that Amitabh Bachchan should come out and say what is his position on Gujarat riots," asked Congress MP and spokesperson Manish Tewari.

The relationship between the Congress and Amitabh worsened after the actor attended the inauguration of the second carriageway of Bandra-Worli Sea Link in Mumbai.

Some Congress leaders protested his presence at the function and even reportedly wrote to Congress President Sonia Gandhi. Even Maharashtra Chief Minister Ashok Chavan expressed his unhappiness about Amitabh's presence at the Sea Link function.

"I was unaware he (Amitabh Bachchan) was going to be invited. As he represents a brand ambassador for some other state, there has been some discontent about it," said Chavan on March 24 after the inauguration of the second carriageway of the Sea Link.

Chavan also avoided sharing the dais with Amitabh on March 27 when he arrived for the Marathi literary meet in Pune a day that planned.

The Bachchan family was embroiled in more controversy when Abhishek Bachchan's posters and his video message at an Earth Day function attended by Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit were apparently pulled off.

15 militant outfits active

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visit Bangladesh from Pakistan and then India to commit their activities, while many from India also sneaked into Bangladesh and then visited Pakistan with fake Bangladeshi passports to have training on arms and explosives.

Director General of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) Hassan Mahmood Khandkar said, "Now Bangladesh is no more a comfortable place for local or foreign militants as we constantly remain vigilant and go after militants upon instructions of the government."

The statements of detained militants also reveal agents of a Pakistani intelligence network not only coordinated the militants' activities in Bangladesh but also provided them with necessary funds and training, sources say.

Now some militant groups are generating funds for them by selling counterfeit Indian currencies in India. The counterfeit currencies, especially Indian rupees and US dollars, are mainly forged in Pakistan and carried to Bangladesh via Dubai.

Then a strong syndicate of militants and criminals supply the fake currencies to India.

"We've detected at least three such gangs having around

50 members. One of the gangs led by Bangladeshi citizen Majumder, one by Pakistani citizen Sarfaraz and the other by another Pakistani named Mohammad Danish," says a top police official asking not to be identified.

Recently, an international money transfer has been detected through which some fund came from Pakistan to detained Pakistani national Rezwana.

Law enforcers could not give a clear idea about how many foreign militant groups are active in Bangladesh. But recent arrests of over a dozen foreign militants belonging to LeT, JeM, HuM and ARCF suggest they are still active here, they say.

One of the Huji founders, Moulana Sheikh Abdus Salam, who is behind bars in connection with the August 21 carnage case, named during interrogation nine Pakistan-based militant organisations which mainly work in Kashmir but also had operated in Bangladesh.

The names of ARCF and LeT surfaced after the arrest of its leader Indian citizens Mufti Obaidullah and Moulana Monsur Ali in May last year. The ARCF used to work for LeT.

The recent arrest of Pakistani national Rezwana Ahmed who admitted at a press briefing of coordinating JeM activities in

Bangladesh suggests the outfit is still active here.

The name of another Pakistan-based militant outfit Tehrik-ul Mujahideen came to notice from the confessional statement of executed Jama'at ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) chief Abdur Rahman.

Rahman had visited Pakistan more than once and met Tehrik-ul Mujahideen leader Jamilur Rahman, who gave JMB 60,000 rupees and another Rs 1 lakh to Tahrik-ul-Mujahideen's Bangladesh chapter leader Abdur Razzak of Natore.

Salam also said Harkatul Mujahideen top leader and Pakistani national Moulana Fazlur Rahman Khalil had also visited Bangladesh. Sources say Khalil made the visit in 1997 and met local militants at an NGO office in Mohammadpur in the capital.

Sources in the law-enforcement and intelligence agencies say they have information about activities of RSO, ARNO and NUPA in the hill areas of Bandarban and Cox's Bazar.

Moulana Salam also substantiated the claim as he in his statement said those groups still have some training camps in Naikhangchhari in Bandarban. Activities of HuM were

detected a few months ago when the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) learned one year after the arrest of Abdul Majid alias Abu Yusuf Butt that he is from India-administered Kashmir.

Moulana Salam said Moulana Tajuddin told him that Majid brought a consignment of grenades used in the August 21, 2004 attack from Chittagong.

Analyses of interrogation statements of Mufti Obaidullah, Moulana Monsur Ali, Shaikh Abdur Rahman, Moulana Abdus Salam and Anisul Mursalin, now detained in India, Indian militants Faisal Nayeem alias Khurram alias Abdullah, Amir Raza, Mufti Obaidullah, Monsur Ali, Golam Yazdani alias Yahia, Mozammel and several others suggest that they had close relation with detained Huji lynchpins Mufti Abdul Hannan, Abu Sayeed alias Dr Zafar and Moulana Abdur Rouf.

Rouf, who was initially involved with Huji but later formed another militant group Tanjim-e Tamiruddin, visited an LeT safe shelter cum training camp in Habiganj in 2002.

Khurram and Amir Raza had often visited Bangladesh but left the country in 2006.

'Big Bang Machine' all set to start operations today

ANI, London

Reports indicate that the Large Hadron Collider (LHC), popularly known as the 'Big Bang Machine', is all set to start operations aimed for record-breaking high-energy particle experiments today, after an 18-month delay for repairs.

According to a report in The Guardian, operators of the LHC have set Tuesday morning as the moment the machine will attempt to steer speeding particles into head-on collisions, creating microscopic bursts of energy that mimic conditions that existed a fraction of a second after the Big Bang.

The start of high-energy operations at the collider marks the end of a frustrating 18-month delay for physicists who saw the machine shut down for essential repair work following an explosion at the laboratory in September 2008, just nine days after it was first switched on.

Polluted water triggers

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which increased to 10,177 in 2007. In 2008 the number of patients rose to 10,182 and in 2009 some 11,601 patients visited the hospital.

This year the monthly average of patients stood at 10,800.

Dr Shahadat attributed the increase partly to a rising population in Dhaka, but said that the government has failed to ensure that residents have access to safe drinking water and proper sanitation systems.

He added, "Even those who are willing to boil water find it very difficult because of frequent loadshedding and the gas crisis."

"It is a vicious cycle."

Quoting laboratory reports, scientists from ICDDR,B said that 40 percent of patients are suffering from cholera and that most patients are from a lower socio-economic group.

A study conducted by ICDDR,B in the capital's Badda area last year revealed the presence of the vibrio cholerae bacteria which is responsible for cholera.

Dr Shahadat said, "Eighty percent of the water samples from the locality contained cholera."

"The situation is similar in other parts of the city."

All residents have had at least one family member who has suffered from diarrhoea during this time.

An aggrieved local said there is little point in lodging a complaint with Wasa, which has seemingly remained indifferent despite a High Court order to improve the quality of its services.

Managing Director of Wasa Takedan A Khan has acknowledged that the water supplied by Wasa is foul-smelling in many areas.

He said, "The water smells because the Shitalakhya River is very polluted."

"We are yet to build a new treatment plant, so we have been using an excessive amount of chemicals to treat the water."

However Khan maintains that the issue of poor quality water is no more severe than in previous years.

He added that just 13 percent of the water supplied by Wasa is sourced from the polluted river.

"If the water supplied by Wasa was polluted we would be experiencing a diarrhoea epidemic," he said.

Khan believes that the majority of people suffering from diarrhoea are slum dwellers that have accessed the water using illegal rubber pipelines.

He said that Wasa and NGOs are working together to provide safe drinking water to slum dwellers.

Ancient doorway to afterlife discovered

AFP, Cairo

A large red granite false door from the tomb of an ancient queen's powerful vizier has been discovered in Luxor, Egypt's culture minister said yesterday.

The carved stone door -- which ancient Egyptians believed was the threshold to the afterlife -- was unearthed near the Karnak Temple in Luxor and belongs to the tomb of User, a powerful advisor to the 18th dynasty Queen Hatshepsut, Faruk Hosni said in a statement.

The door, 1.75 metres (5.7 feet) high and 50 cm (19 inches) thick, is engraved with religious texts and various titles used by User, including mayor of the city, vizier and prince, antiquities chief Zahi Hawass was quoted as saying.

"The newly discovered door was reused during the Roman period. It was removed from the tomb of User and used in the wall of a Roman structure," said Mansur Boraik, who headed the excavation mission.

Hatshepsut, who ruled Egypt between 1479 BC and 1458 BC, was the longest reigning female pharaoh.