



Missile strikes, clashes kill 36 in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

US missiles and clashes between Pakistani troops and militants killed up to 36 people, including five soldiers, as pre-dawn violence swept the tribal badlands on the Afghan border yesterday.

Pakistan's fight against militants and a covert US drone war against Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders is concentrated in the mountains of Pakistan's northwest border area which Washington calls the most dangerous region on earth.

Unmanned US aircraft fired three missiles that destroyed a compound in the North Waziristan, a stronghold of Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda affiliates, killing six suspected militants, Pakistani security officials said.

Washington considers the semi-autonomous tribal belt the headquarters of al-Qaeda and accuses militants there of plotting and staging attacks on the 126,000 US and Nato-led troops fighting a nearly nine-year war in Afghanistan.

The missiles struck a compound owned by Zamir Khan, a local tribesman, in the village of Tapi, about 20km east of

Miranshah, the main town of North Waziristan, security officials said.

The identities of the dead were not immediately clear, nor whether they included any high-value targets.

The area is a known stronghold of the Haqqani network active in attacks on US troops in Afghanistan and of Afghan warlord Hafiz Gul Bahadur, who is reputed to control up to 2,000 fighters in the nine-year Afghan insurgency.

After the first attack at about 12:45 am (1945 GMT) residents saw flames leaping out of the compound and said more drones were hovering over the area, preventing them from collecting the dead.

North Waziristan has been increasingly targeted by US drones since a Jordanian al-Qaeda double agent blew himself up, killing seven CIA employees in a neighbouring Afghan province in December.

Under US pressure, Pakistan has in the past year significantly increased operations against militants in its tribal belt.

Paramilitary and soldiers are pressing a new offensive against the Taliban into a

second week in the tribal district of Orakzai in a bid to eradicate those believed to have fled a major offensive in South Waziristan last year.

But in the tribal district that straddles Nato supply lines, militants armed with guns and rockets attacked a military camp, sparking clashes that killed five soldiers and dozens of fighters, officials said.

Troops repelled the militants from storming the paramilitary Frontier Corps camp in the lawless northwest tribal district of Khyber and the ensuing gunbattle left 25 rebels said, military and local officials said.

Khyber is the main route from northwest Pakistan across the mountains into neighbouring Afghanistan and the main land supply route for US and Nato-led troops fighting a nine-year insurgency across the border.

Around 100 militants launched an attack on the camp in Jansai near Bara town around 2:00 am (2100 GMT), local administration chief Shafirullah Wazir told AFP. Five soldiers were killed in the attack, he said.

Zardari planned murder of my father

Charges Fatima Bhutto

ANI, Karachi

Former Pakistan president Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's grand daughter, Fatima Bhutto, has charged 'uncle' President Asif Ali Zardari for orchestrating the murder of her father, Mir Murtagha Bhutto, saying the killers of her father are 'ruling the country at present'.

Speaking during her book 'Songs of Blood and Sword' launch function, Fatima described in detail her father's murder, which took place 14 years ago.

Without taking Zardari's name, she said 'the man, who orchestrated the crime of killing her father, is presently leading the nation.'

"The streetlights went off and roads leading to 70 Clifton were blocked by heavy contingents of police who were waiting to kill my father," Fatima, a noted political commentator, said.

BENAZIR KILLING PROBE UN delays report on Zardari's behest

ANI, Islamabad

The United Nations (UN) has delayed publishing the report of its commission, which was set up to probe former Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's assassination, on President Asif Ali Zardari's request.

The report, which was scheduled to be published on Tuesday (March 30), is now likely to be made public on April 15.

Confirming the delay, a statement issued by the UN said Zardari had sent an urgent request to the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to delay the publication of the report, which was accepted.

"The Secretary-General has accepted an urgent request by the President of Pakistan to delay the presentation of the report of the assassination of the former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto until 15 April 2010", the statement said.

Bomb attack kills 13 in Afghan market

AFP, Kabul

A bomb blast in a crowded market in southern Afghanistan killed 13 people and wounded dozens more yesterday in an area at the forefront of the US-led war against the Taliban.

Afghan officials said the attack took place in a village near Lashkar Gah, capital of Helmand province, as farmers were receiving seeds being handed out to persuade Afghans to abandon the poppy crops that produce heroin.

A Nato official said the toll was at least 13 dead and dozens more wounded.

The bomb was probably a Taliban-style crudely-made improvised explosive device, said the official with Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf).

"We don't know the exact cause, but it was likely to be an IED, as there is no suggestion of a suicide bomber at this stage," he told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Afghanistan's interior ministry said the bomb was attached to a bicycle and detonated by remote control.

Earlier provincial government spokesman Daud Ahmadi said a suicide bomber had walked into a crowd of farmers as seeds were being distributed to farmers and blown himself up.

Helmand province is a volatile vortex of the insurgency that has been blighting Afghanistan for more than eight years, with Taliban working with drug gangs to keep much of the region out

of the writ of the Afghan government.

Just 20km from Lashkar Gah, 15,000 US, Nato and Afghan troops have been taking on insurgents for six weeks in the Marjah region, a poppy-producing plain that is the source of much of the world's heroin.

Part of the efforts to drive out the insurgents and drug lords in southern Afghanistan depends on the success of bringing alternative security and enabling farmers to grow crops other than opium poppies.

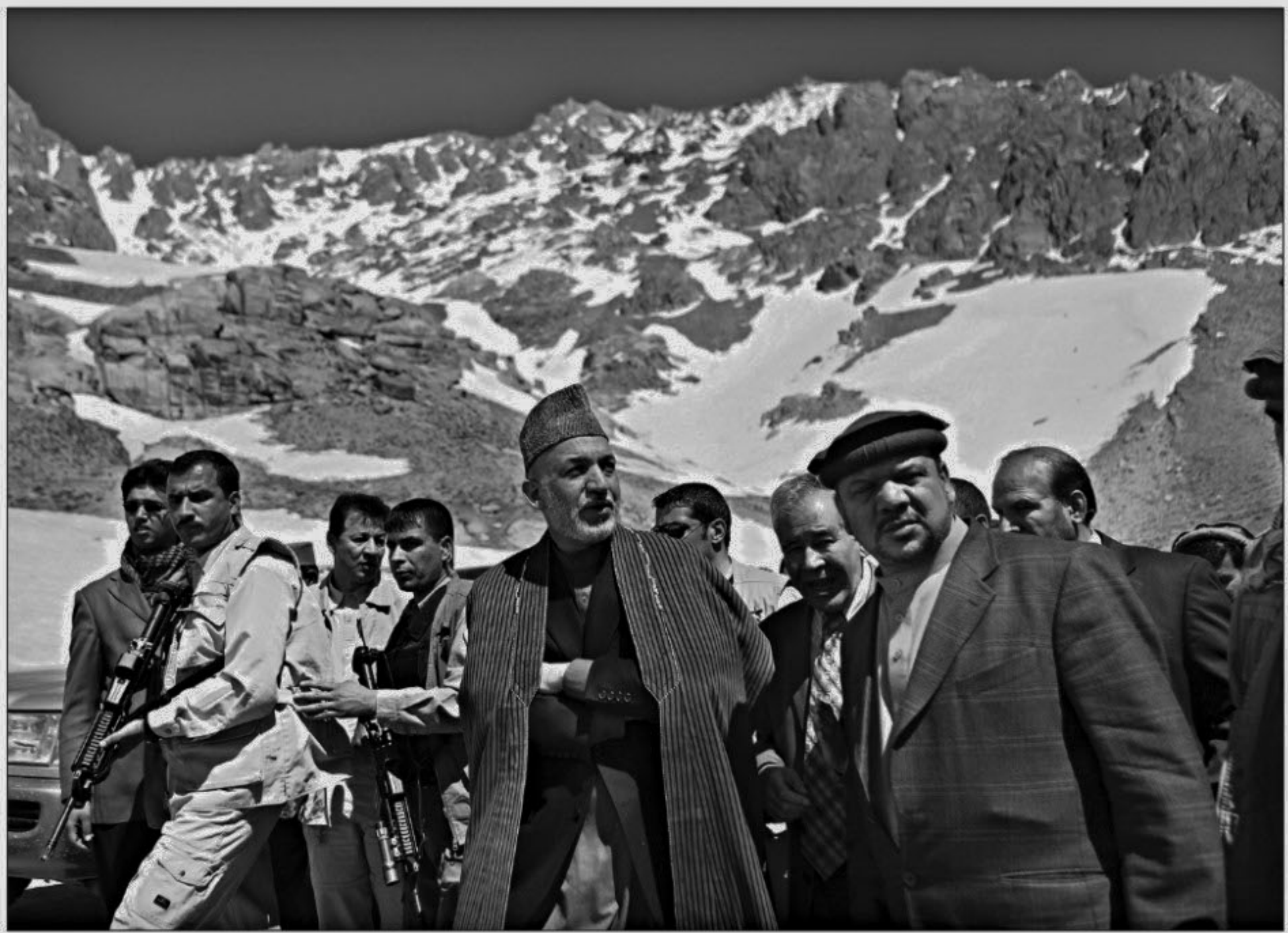
Distribution of seeds, mainly wheat, is central to that effort.

The United States is leading a troop surge in Afghanistan, where the number of foreign troops is to rise from 126,000 to 150,000 by August, when commanders hope to have quelled the Taliban's southern spiritual capital of Kandahar.

Military planners say operations in Kandahar province, which neighbours Helmand, have already begun and will escalate in coming months as thousands more US and Nato forces deploy.

"Kandahar is what we're looking into now. It is a cornerstone in reversing the momentum for the Taliban," Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters on a visit to Kabul.

"Kandahar is the very heart of the insurgency. The next operations are there," the top US military commander stressed.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai (C) walks along with his first Vice President Mohammad Qasim Fahim (R) during their visit to the site of an avalanche in the Salang Pass north of Kabul yesterday. More than 165 people were killed last month as an avalanche occurred in the Salang Pass.

Maoists kill Congress leader in Jharkhand

ANI, Ranchi

The Maoists shot dead Congress leader Gobardhan Mahali in Jharkhand's East Singhbhum district to protest against Operation Green Hunt in the state.

Mahali, who was the Congress president of Dalbhumgarh block in East Singhbhum district was killed late on Tuesday night, said police sources.

"Around 25 rebels of Communist Party of India-Maoists (CPI-M) raided Mahali's house in Maachbhandhar village and took him towards the jungle area at gunpoint. The Maoists then pumped in three bullets in his head," said a police official.

The Maoists had earlier warned that it would kill Congress leaders if the operation is not stopped against them.

100 Indian sailors seized by Somali pirates

AFP, Ahmedabad

Up to 100 Indian sailors have been captured by Somali pirates who seized seven or eight boats in one of their biggest raids yet, a shipping body told AFP Tuesday.

The cargo vessels, from the western Indian state of Gujarat, were reported missing at the weekend when a local shipping body received a call from the crew of a boat that had escaped the attack.

"On Saturday afternoon we got the information that seven or eight vessels registered with us have been hijacked by Somali pirates," said Kasam Ali, president of the shipping group Kutch Vahanvati Association in Gujarat.

"Eighty to 100 people who were on these vessels are missing," he added.

Navy sources said they had been alerted by the ministry of shipping to eight missing boats. India, whose merchant navy has frequently been targeted off the coast of Somalia, has a warship in the Gulf of Aden, off Somalia.

Mumbai attacks trial closes, verdict on May 3

AFP, Mumbai

The trial of a Pakistani accused of being in a 10-man team of gunmen who killed 166 people during a rampage through Mumbai in 2008 closed yesterday after a year of dramatic courtroom testimony.

The judge will deliver a verdict on May 3 on 22-year-old Mohammed Ajmal Kasab, considered the lone surviving gunman from the 2008 attacks, which traumatised India and led to a spike in tension with Pakistan.

The prosecution has called for him to be put to death and has presented evidence it considers overwhelmingly proves his guilt, including a photo of him carrying an AK-47 machine gun through the main train terminal in Mumbai.

Kasab stands accused on scores of charges, including waging war against India and murder over the three days of carnage, which targeted luxury hotels, a tourist restaurant, the railway station and a Jewish centre.

"The trial has ended and the prosecution has presented the links between Kasab, LeT (militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba) and the Pakistani army," state prosecutor Ujjwal Nikam told reporters outside court.

During his final arguments, state prosecutor Nikam had called Kasab a "conviving, depraved murderer" who was trained by the Pakistan-based Islamist group Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Kasab initially pleaded not guilty when the trial started in April, but in July made a shock confession, admitting being one of two gunmen who opened fire at the train station.

He also detailed how the group was trained by the banned LeT, and he then asked for swift justice.

MRP launched

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Director Brig Gen Reyaat Ullah told a press conference at the Department of Immigration and Passport office yesterday.

He said people can collect MRP forms from the Dhaka office and its website (www.dip.gov.bd). National identity card or birth certificate is mandatory, he said, adding that applicant's photograph and fingerprints will be taken at the Agargaon passport office after the submission of the application.

"We expect to hand over MRP in the first week of May as police verification and other formalities will take time," he said, adding that passport booklets have been imported from Poland while lamination foil from France.

"Apart from issuing new MRPs, we will have to gradually convert existing 1.30 crore manual passports," he said. He also admitted challenges on the way to meet the ICAO deadline.

The fee for emergency MRPs has been fixed at Tk 6,000 while Tk 3,000 for regular ones. The 84-page new passport will be valid for five years.

MRPs will also be issued from foreign missions of the country but equipping the missions with manpower and machinery will be a lengthy process. The fee for emergency MRP from foreign missions will be \$200 while \$100 for normal ones, a notification of the home ministry said earlier.

Speaking at the briefing, Home Secretary Abdus Sobhan Sikder said the present manual passport can be renewed in the country and foreign missions till March 31, 2011.

"ICAO countries decided to switch to MRP in 2002. Most of the member countries had introduced it much earlier, but unfortunately we could not make it," he said.

The Home Secretary said the current hand-written passports would remain effective until their validity expires. "Overseas visits will not be hampered if introduction of MRP takes a bit longer than expected," he clarifies.

The government selected Malaysia-based IRIS Corporation Berhad for the Tk 526 crore MRP and MRV (machine-readable visa) project. The project was launched in 1989 but changes in decisions by successive governments have delayed it.

Both the home secretary and project director kept from making comments regarding the allegations about the selection process and efficiency of IRIS.

A belated plea

FROM PAGE 1

Kailin Punji of Nahar Tea Garden following the HC directive and his men have so far felled around 2,000 trees in Kailin and Aslom Punjis, said local indigenous people.

Dibarmin, a local Khasia of Aslom Pann (betel leaf) Punji, said that around 300 unmarked trees were felled in Aslom Punji so far. Trader's men felled around 1,650 trees in Kailin Punji until March 22, he added.

Bably Talangs, a rights activist from the community, said that the timber trader has felled the unmarked trees with less than three-foot radius thickness.

A group of Khasia people met Mofizul Islam, deputy commissioner of Moulvibazar, yesterday and submitted a letter to him seeking maintenance of law and order in Khasia Punjis as tense situation prevails following cutting down of unmarked trees, said Dibarmin.

Mofizul said that he was informed of the attorney general's appeal petition and received a formal complaint from the Khasia community over the felling of unmarked trees in Aslom Punji of Nahar Tea Garden.

"I have already conveyed the message to the divisional forest officer and talked to the superintendent of police for taking measures to maintain law and order," said the DC.

Salim bought a total of 4,000 trees from Nahar Tea Garden at a cost of Tk 1.5 crore in 2008 and had already felled 1,200 trees in Aslom Punji immediately following a government permit in 2008.

The HC apparently in its February 22 directive did not take into account the number of trees already felled.

Earlier in 2008, the tree felling move was stalled following public protests by the environmentalists and local Khasia community, who depend on the trees for traditional betel leaf cultivation.

Later in February this year, the forest department issued a fresh permit to continue with the tree felling but asked the trader not to cut 450 trees in Khasia punji (settlement) and slapped an enhanced royalty for the trees.

Romania finds 50 Afghans hidden in vinegar tanker

AFP, Bucharest

Romanian border police caught 50 Afghan immigrants, including 15 children, attempting to illegally cross into Hungary hidden in a road tanker transporting vinegar, officials said yesterday.

Police on Tuesday checked the tanker with a "special device which detects heart beats and the result was positive", authorities said in a statement.

They found the vehicle had been divided into two compartments -- one for the vinegar and one furnished with benches, lighting and ventilation for illegal immigrants.

Authorities said the Afghans -- 28 men, seven women and 15 children -- wanted to go to Italy to find jobs.

Indians scale down in Afghanistan fearing more attacks

AFP, Kabul

India has suspended medical aid and teaching programmes in Afghanistan, where Indian businesses and charities are slashing staff over fears they are increasingly targeted by militants.

Kabul-based Indians believe they were the specific targets of three recent attacks in the Afghan capital, including a February 26 bomb and gun assault on a guesthouse that killed 17 people, among them seven Indians.

Indian charity Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which promoted economic independence for Afghan women, said it had pulled all staff from Afghanistan.

"At the moment there is no one on behalf of SEWA in Kabul because after the 26 February disaster we were advised to come back (to India)," said SEWA's Afghanistan coordinator Pratibha Pandiya.

Indian officials said a December 15 suicide car bombing that killed eight people also targeted Indians, although former Afghan first vice president Ahmad Zia Massoud had a home in the same street.

The manager of an IT company that many Indians believe was the target, said his Indian staff had since moved to 11.

"We cannot stop people from leaving and we cannot guarantee anyone's safety," the manager, also an Indian, said on condition of anonymity and asking that his company also not be named.

HSC exams begin today

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including heightened security to ensure peaceful atmosphere at the examination centres.

Bangla First Paper will be held on the first day today. The second exam -- Bangla Second Paper will be held on March 5.

Around 18.24 percent of the registered students have dropped out this year as they failed to fill in exam forms.

However, the drop-out rate is low this year, which was 19.92 percent in 2009.

According to statistics from the education board computer centre, a total of 7,02,708 students were registered as regular students in the 2008-09 session after passing their school certificate exams.

But of the total, 1,28,205 students are not appearing at the 2010 exams, according to the stats.

Some 5,74,503 regular students and 1,61,870 students who failed in previous years will participate in this year's examination.

The highest number of students sitting for this year's exam is from Dhaka Board while the lowest from Sylhet Board.

A total of 1,96,197 students will sit under Dhaka Board; 83,715 under Rajshahi Board; 54,525 under Comilla Board; 80,080 under Jessore Board; 43,256 under Chittagong Board; 35,656 under Barisal Board; 20,125 under Sylhet Board; 73,986 under Dinajpur Board; 74,413 under Madrasa Board and 70,504 under Technical Board.

Besides, 3,916 students of Diploma in Business Studies (DIBS) will sit under Dhaka Board.

Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid is likely to visit some of the exam centres in Dhaka as well as a few outside the city, said sources.

Upgraded Drug Admin

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The logistics have not been increased at all. There is not enough space at its present office to accommodate an increased number of employees. It has no vehicles and no facility to preserve the samples of the drugs collected during a drive, he said.

The institution has been suffering from lack of manpower and necessary infrastructure for last eight years.

It is currently running with only 159 staff. There are no superintendents in many districts, the authorities often find it difficult to launch a drive in the drug market and to check spurious drugs. It has only 24 offices in 64 districts.

The DA's workload has been increased at least 20 times since 1984. But due to corruption and lack of manpower it failed to earn people's trust.

As per the World Health