

Afghan suicide attack targets CIA base

AP, Kabul

A suicide attack killed one civilian yesterday outside a CIA base in eastern Afghanistan where the agency suffered one of the worst attacks in its history in December, an Afghan official said.

Two security guards were wounded in the blast outside Camp Chapman in Khost province, said Mubarez Zadran, a spokesman for the provincial governor. A suicide blast inside the base five months ago killed eight people.

The suicide bomber in Monday's attack was in a vehicle packed with explosives, the Afghan Interior Ministry said in a statement. The victims were all Afghans, the ministry said.

US Army Maj Justin Platt, spokesman for the 3rd Brigade Combat Team at nearby Salerno Camp, said the bomber blew himself up in an area where vehicles are screened before entering the camp.

"The explosion was very strong and thick smoke covered the sky afterward," said Wali Mohammad, 17, who was working at a construction site nearby.

The Taliban claimed responsibility soon after the attack.

In December, seven CIA employees and a Jordanian intelligence officer were killed when a suicide bomber detonated his cache of explosives at Camp Chapman.

The CIA had cultivated the bomber - a Jordanian doctor identified as Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi in hopes of obtaining information about al-Qaeda's second in command.

Al-Balawi turned out to be a double-agent.

Also Monday, a rocket attack on a school in Ghazni wounded a teacher and three students, the Interior Ministry said.



In this picture taken on November 27, 2008, flames rush out of the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai, during an attack by suspected terrorists. Mohammed Ajmal Amir Kasab, the lone surviving gunman from the 2008 Mumbai attacks was found guilty yesterday, of murder and waging war against India, the most serious charges in his trial, the judge said.

Court suspends court martial against Fonseka

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's court of appeal yesterday ordered the suspension of a court martial against ex-army chief and defeated presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka.

The court ordered that the military tribunal that began the hearing against Fonseka on March 1 should halt its work until a decision was made on the validity of the military legal proceedings.

Fonseka, who was defeated by incumbent Mahinda Rajapakse at January polls, was arrested in February and charged with engaging in politics before he had quit the army in November.

He says the charges were part of a political vendetta.

Fonseka last year led troops to victory over Tamil Tiger rebels after decades of ethnic conflict on the island, but he later fell out with Rajapakse.

US OIL SPILL DISASTER Could be record disaster, BP must pay Says Obama

BBC ONLINE

US President Barack Obama has described a sprawling oil slick in the Gulf of Mexico as a "potentially unprecedented" environmental disaster.

Speaking in Louisiana, Obama said his government would do whatever it takes to clean up the oil, adding that BP was responsible and must pay.

He said the focus was now on preventing any further damage to the Gulf coast.

BP says it will be at least a week before temporary measures to stem the leak are in place.

But it could take up to three months to drill relief wells that could fully contain the spillage, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar warned on Sunday.

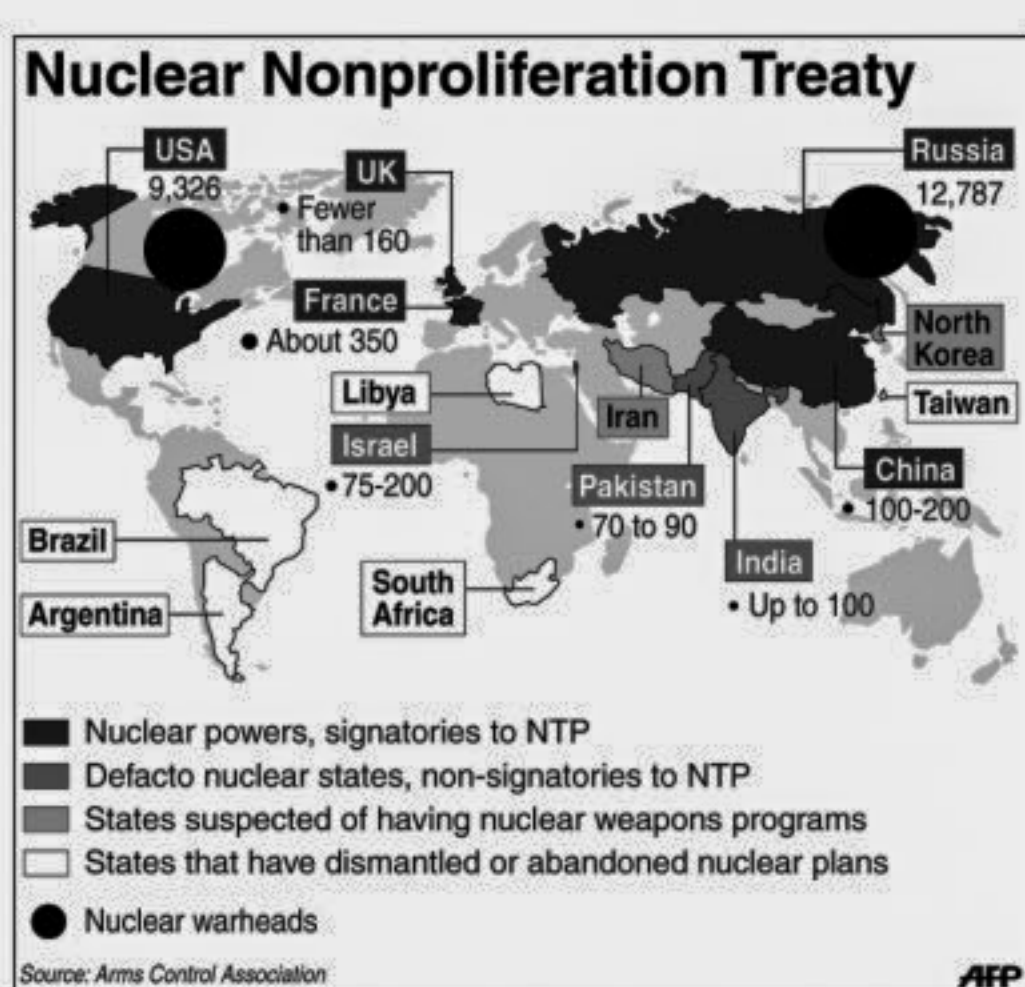
Iran, US take their nuclear cases to UN stage

AP, United Nations

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad brings his nuclear case to New York yesterday, turning a US treaty conference into a stage for Tehran's long-running showdown with the Western powers over its uranium enrichment program.

The only head of state participating, Ahmadinejad was one of Monday's scheduled kick off speakers for the month long session, to review the workings of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Departing Tehran on Sunday, the Iranian leader made clear he would assail US-led efforts to impose a new round of UN sanctions on his country for refusing to stop its enrichment program, which Washington and others contend is meant to produce the nuclear fuel for bombs in violation of Iran's NPT obligations.



"Under the pretext of prevention of nuclear weapons proliferation, they impose heavy pressures on independent countries," Ahmadinejad complained to reporters.

He is also expected to counter with a denunciation of the United States and other nuclear-armed nations for their slow movement toward disarmament. "The atomic bomb has become a tool for bullying, domination and expansionism," he said Sunday.

US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, following Ahmadinejad to the UN stage later Monday, suggested over the weekend he was coming to New York "to divert attention and confuse the issue."

"We're not going to permit Iran to try to change the story from their failure to comply" with the NPT, she said on Sunday's "Meet the Press" on NBC.

Indian minister denies sexual assault claims

BBC ONLINE

Haratal Halappa, food and civil supplies minister of India's southern Karnataka state, who resigned after the wife of a friend accused him of sexual assault, denies the charge. He says he is being framed by political rivals.

A Karnataka police official said his arrest was imminent.

Correspondents say the incident has embarrassed the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government.

Mr Halappa claims some of his own party leaders are among those who want to frame him.

He says he resigned to save the government from embarrassment and vowed to clear his reputation if there was a "proper inquiry."

The woman, who lodged a complaint against the minister, said the incident took place last November.

Thai PM agrees on polls in November

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's prime minister said yesterday he was ready to hold elections in November to end a tense stand-off with opposition protesters, subject to certain conditions under his reconciliation roadmap.

The five-point plan calls for respect for the monarchy, greater social equality, an impartial media, an independent probe into the current political crisis and a debate on the need for constitutional reform.

"I'm convinced that it will not take long to achieve national reconciliation and when we achieve national reconciliation the government is ready to hold elections on November 14," said Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.

"I think this is the best solution at the current time," he said in a nationally televised address.

The mostly poor or working class "Red Shirts" protesters have occupied parts of Bangkok since mid-March, defying a state of emergency in their bid to topple a government they see as elitist and undemocratic.

There have been a series of tense confrontations between the demonstrators and the security forces in Bangkok, where 27 people died and nearly 1,000 were injured in unrest last month.

The Red Shirts have reinforced roadblocks and stepped up security checks on the perimeter of their sprawling protest site, which has been fortified with barricades made from piled up truck tyres, razor wire and bamboo stakes.

Abhisit last month rejected a compromise offer by the Reds to disperse if elections were held within three months, and the protesters have reverted to their original demand for immediate polls.



Video grab obtained yesterday from an NYPD surveillance camera shows a white man, in the circle, in his 40s was caught near the car bomb in Times Square in New York on May 01, 2010. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg called him a "person of interest" and city police chief Raymond Kelly said he was acting in a "furtive" manner as he hurried away from the scene. While New York has been on a terrorist alert ever since the September 11, 2001 attacks, authorities have ruled out a major Islamist militant link after Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan claimed it was behind the botched bombing attempt.

Pak Taliban threaten US cities in new video

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud has vowed to attack major US cities in two purported new videos released months after his reported killing in a US missile strike.

The videos emerged after an attempted car bombing in New York City, for which his faction claimed responsibility in a third video, and provided the most substantial evidence so far that he survived a US attempt on his life.

Mehsud threatened to retaliate against the United States for the killing of Islamist militant leaders, appearing in a nine-minute video allegedly made on April 4, after his supposed death in January.

The videos spotlight the Islamist militant threat in nuclear-armed Pakistan, which the United States has put on the front line of the war on al-Qaeda.

Afghan graft trial opens

AFP, Kabul

The trial of a former civil servant accused of carrying hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes from Saudi Arabia for a government minister in Afghanistan opened yesterday.

Mohammad Noor worked as an aide to a former minister for hajj and religious affairs who is charged with taking bribes from a foreign catering company during last year's Hajj pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia.

Prosecutors say the former civil servant collected the bribe money for his boss, former minister Mohammad Siddiq Chakari, and took it back to Afghanistan. He was arrested on arrival at the airport with 362,000 dollars.

"Mohammad Noor was responsible for finalising criminal deals, collecting the bribe money and transferring it to specific individuals," prosecutor Mohammad Razaq Totakhail told the court in Kabul.

Totakhail said Noor had confessed to taking more than half a million dollars in bribe money to Chakari on previous trips.

Official corruption is endemic in impoverished, war-torn Afghanistan and Noor's trial is seen as important groundwork for bringing Chakari - currently in Britain - to justice.

Afghan authorities have issued an arrest warrant for Chakari and are seeking his extradition on corruption charges.

In court, Noor admitted carrying money from Saudi Arabia to Kabul for Chakari, but said that he did not know where it had come from.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has made a corruption crackdown one of his top priorities and has established a special tribunal to try corrupt officials, including ministers.

Kim Jong-il's train reaches China

BBC ONLINE

North Korean leader Kim Jong-il may be making a rare visit to China, reports from China and South Korea suggest.

His personal train was said to have crossed into China at the border city of Dandong early on Monday, reportedly bound for the port city of Dalian.

The South Korean government said it could not confirm the reports - but there have been rumours of such a visit for several weeks.

It would be his first visit to China in over four years.

China is North Korea's main trading partner and the country perceived to have the most influence on the communist state.

The possible visit comes amid growing international concern over North Korea.

It has refused to return to six-party talks aimed at ending its nuclear ambitions.

Delays in projects bleed public coffer

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WB imposes .5 percent commitment fee per loan instalment amount for failing to maintain the implementation timeline.

ADB provides loans in two categories -- a soft loan titled Asian Development Fund (ADF), and Ordinary Capital Resource (OCR) which has a higher interest rate. ADB charges .75 percent commitment fees in OCR funded projects. NDF imposes .5 percent commitment fee.

The government pays the commitment fees every six months of a fiscal year.

Finance ministry sources said in almost all projects funded by the three international lending agencies, the government ends up paying commitment fees for failure to maintain agreed upon implementation timelines.

WB waived the commitment fees for the period between 1987 and 2003, and again for the years 2009 and 2010 due to the global economic recession.

Between January 2004 and December 2008 the government paid Tk 110 crore to WB as commitment fees in 38 projects, and Tk 12.2 crore to ADB between 2004 and 2009 in five projects.

In 2008 NDF realised commitment fees worth Tk 4.54 crore in two projects.

An official of the Economic Relations Division said the lending agencies argue that many countries are desperately looking for development funds, and if funds earmarked for Bangladesh are not properly utilised on time then the other seekers were deprived for no good reason. So the country responsible for holding back much needed funds should be penalised.

In the last one year, the government paid Tk 50 lakh as commitment fees, as it failed to utilise loans on time.

WB in 1998 agreed to lend Tk 226 crore for an arsenic mitigation and water supply project. The government had to count about Tk 11 crore as commitment fees between 2004 and 2007 for delays in implementing the project.

The project was scheduled to be implemented between July 1998 and June 2001. But it

was completed in June 2007, taking six years or about 200 percent more time than agreed upon.

An evaluation report of the Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation Division (IMED) showed the project director was changed six times during the implementation period. One of the directors worked for only a month before being replaced, while the project details were revised three times.

One of the main aims of the project was to supply arsenic free water to the people.

The IMED report said as the deadline was extended, the cost of implementation increased with inflation, while the people also had to wait six extra years to get arsenic free water.

"In the meantime, many people might have gotten sick drinking arsenic contaminated water," the report noted.

The information available shows that the government had to pay commitment fees even in small projects.

WB lent around Tk 32 crore in 2000 for an air quality management project. The government had to pay Tk 27.84 lakh as commitment fees between 2004 and 2007 for implementation delays.

Sources in the planning, and finance ministries said project implementation are delayed for several reasons. One of the major reasons is purchase related, they added.

Purchase is a major portion of the projects, and when time comes to award contracts for supplying equipment and materials, influential quarters start lobbying government high ups for contracts. Settling that race takes up so much time that loan instalment disbursement deadlines are often missed, the sources said.

Frequent policy changes, appointment of inefficient persons as project directors, and corruption contributed to delays in implementing different health sector projects as well, the sources said.

The government had to pay commitment fees to the tune of Tk 2.64 crore for implementation delays in Health and Population Project between 2004 and 2006, Tk 2.54 crore in National Nutrition Project between 2004 and 2008, Tk 77 lakh in HIV/AIDS Prevention Project between 2004 and 2007, and Tk 6.5 crore in Health and Nutrition Sector Programme between 2006 and 2008.

Commitment fees had to be

paid in many projects in power, communications, and financial sectors as well.

Between 2004 and 2008 Tk 3.76 crore commitment fee had to be paid for delays in implementing the Central Bank Strengthening Project, and Tk 10.15 crore was paid in the Enterprise Growth and Bank Modernisation Project during the same period for the same reason.

For implementation delays in Primary Education Development Project Tk 76 lakh had to be paid as commitment fees between 2004 and 2005, Tk 6.46 lakh was paid in Female Secondary School Assistance Project between 2004 and 2008, and Tk 8.95 crore in the Second Primary Education Project between 2004 and 2008.

In Rural Electrification and Renewable Energy Project Tk 12.32 crore had to be paid as commitment fees between 2004 and 2007, while in Power Sector Technical Assistance Project the paid penalty was Tk 46 lakh between 2005 and 2008.

ADB and NDF realised a total of about Tk 17 crore as commitment fees in six projects in power and energy sectors between 2004 and 2009.

IRAQ ELECTION Baghdad vote recount under way

BBC ONLINE

A manual recount of some of the ballots cast in Baghdad in Iraq's March election has begun in the capital.

The incumbent Prime Minister Nouri Maliki called for the recount in the province, saying the electronic system of counting was flawed.

The election was narrowly won by Maliki's rival Iyad Allawi and his Iraqiyya bloc, but neither got a big enough majority to form a government.

The recount affects 68 seats and could materially change the result.

Election officials will recount two million votes in a process that could take weeks.

Maliki won the vote in Baghdad, taking 26 seats to Allawi's 24, but it is possible that the recount will give him a wider winning margin in the capital and overturn the national result.

Allawi's Iraqiyya bloc have a two-seat lead on the State of Law coalition led by Maliki in the 325-seat parliament.

The recount has further delayed the formation of a coalition government.

There have been several suicide car bombings in recent weeks, which have killed scores of people.

Fears have been expressed that a prolonged period of political turmoil might leave a vacuum that the insurgents could exploit as the Americans reduce their presence, correspondents say.

The Obama administration has said it aims to withdraw nearly all of its troops by next year.

CCC polls

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time before the Dhaka City Corporation poll on May 31.

The EC had selected four venues -- Government Bangla College in Mirpur, Paltan Maidan, Dhupkhola Math in Sutrapur and Rajuk High School in Uttara -- for the meetings.

But the commission had to change its decision of holding the DCC poll on May 31 as the government expressed reservations about the election date.

The EC is now making preparation to hold the CCC poll in mid-June and rules will be framed for organising projection meetings, said EC officials.

If the meetings are organised under EC's supervision, it would help reduce the candidates' expenditure on electioneering, they said.

The contenders for the mayoral post must follow the electoral code of conduct while speaking from a common dais, they said.

The new code of conduct imposes restrictions on pasting posters and leaflets or daubing graffiti on the walls of any establishment in the city corporation area.

The EC enjoys the authority to cancel candidature on grounds of gross irregularities in city corporation elections.