

## '60 abducted' in north Pakistan

BBC, AFP

Police in Pakistan say at least 60 people were kidnapped by suspected militants in the country's volatile northwest tribal region yesterday.

The hostages were seized in Kurram after the vehicles they were travelling in were ambushed by men reportedly dressed as police officers.

AFP reports, the hostages were travelling from Peshawar city to Parachinar, the main town in the tribal region of Kurram, when their vehicle was intercepted by around 40 armed militants, local administration chief Khalid Omarzai, said.

Abdul Rashid, a police official in the nearby town of Hangu, said he had received information that "the number of hostages was 50 plus."

"They stopped their vehicles and whisked away the passengers," Rashid said.

Omarzai said the incident took place as authorities were trying to hammer out a peace accord between Sunni and Shia communities in the area.

"It is an attempt to sabotage the peace efforts," he said. The area is a sectarian flashpoint, where Sunni and Shia militants have clashed in the past. They have also kidnapped rival sect members for payment of ransom and have sometimes killed the hostages.

Local MP Mufti Janan told AFP the kidnappers appeared to be from Kurram, where Pakistani Taliban militants are active.

"They have contacted me to convey that some travellers were in their custody," he said, without saying how many hostages were being held.

"I am in touch with them and hope they will be released shortly," he added.

Shiites account for about 20 percent of Pakistan's Sunni-dominated population. The two communities usually coexist peacefully, but more than 4,000 people have died in outbreaks of sectarian violence since the late 1980s.

BBC adds, heavily armed militants seized several vehicles that were travelling in convoy to Parachinar, the main city in Kurram, said Mir Chamam, the area police chief.

"The militants were posing as policemen and wearing police uniforms," he said.



Disabled Sri Lankan soldiers attend a military ceremony to lay the foundation stone for a 10 million dollar hospice for quadriplegics in Anuradhapura yesterday. Nearly 30,000 government troops were injured and 6,200 killed during the last three years of war with the Tamil Tigers.

PHOTO: AFP

## Brothers battle for Labour leadership

BBC NEWS

Ed Miliband has confirmed he is to stand for the Labour Party leadership against his older brother David.

The former energy minister declared his intention in a speech to centre-left think-tank the Fabian Society.

He said the party must renew itself and Labour needed to be "clear and honest" about the scale of its election defeat.

He said he would "absolutely" be ready to serve under David Miliband, should his brother win, and promised the leadership contest would be civilised.

The pair are the only two Labour MPs so far to have announced they are standing for the party leadership, previously held by Gordon Brown.

Ed Miliband, 40, kicked off Saturday's speech by joking that everybody had been asking whose bid their mother would support - then said she was behind the left-wing MP John Cruddas.

Mr Miliband said: "The one advantage of opposition is the chance to renew, to think about the country we live in and the people we seek to represent."

## Man sentenced to death for China knife attacks

AFP, Beijing

A court in eastern China yesterday sentenced an unemployed man to death for knifing 29 children and three adults with a meat cleaver at a kindergarten, leaving several of his victims badly injured.

Three hundred people were in court for a half-day open trial that convicted Xu Yuyuan of intentional homicide, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

Twenty-nine children aged four or under and two teachers and a security guard were injured when Xu attacked them with the cleaver at Zhongxin nursery school in Taixing city on April 29.

Xu, who had been jobless for nine years, told the court his motive was to vent his rage against society, but he appealed against a death penalty, saying the punishment was too harsh because he had not killed anyone.

A string of school attacks has shocked China in recent weeks. Police have been ordered to beef up security at school compounds and nearby residential communities.

Four of Xu's young victims were gravely hurt, according to official media, but there have been Internet reports claiming a number of the children died in the attack, which occurred in Jiangsu province.

Xinhua said that the court decided even though Xu did not succeed in killing his victim, "his criminal motivation was extremely despicable, his means extremely cruel, his plot especially evil."

No one from the court could be contacted by AFP yesterday.

There have been five attacks on schools in China in less than two months, with 17 people - including 15 children - killed and more than 80 injured, according to previous Xinhua reports.

## Hong Kong democracy activists make final appeal for votes

AP, Hong Kong

Five Hong Kong democracy activists made a final appeal to voters yesterday before a special election they triggered as an attempt to pressure Beijing to make political reforms in this former British colony.

Beijing opposes today's election as a challenge to its authority, and Hong Kong's leader said he and his senior officials won't vote in the contest.

The five activists, former legislators representing each of Hong Kong's five major electoral districts, resigned from their seats in January. Their plan was to engineer a special election where they would compete against pro-Beijing candidates, effectively setting up a de facto territory-wide referendum on democracy.

But with the Chinese government

questioning the campaign, Beijing loyalists in Hong Kong decided to boycott the election. As a result, the five activists are expected to easily win against a smattering of unknown candidates. Now, the focus has shifted to voter turnout.

Political analysts say turnout will be low because of the pro-China boycott. But the five former lawmakers say that if their base - which they estimate at 25 percent of Hong Kong's 3.4 million registered voters - turns out to vote, they will consider the campaign a success.

"That would be a mandate," Albert Chan, one of the five legislators who resigned, said on the sidelines of a rally late Friday.

The activists received a boost yesterday from Anson Chan, formerly Hong Kong's No 2 official and one of the territory's most

popular politicians. Chan, dubbed by supporters as "Hong Kong's conscience," campaigned with ex-legislator Tanya Chan on Hong Kong Island.

"If we don't want Hong Kong to become a city where free expression is muzzled, if we don't want to suffer from intimidation, we must exercise our votes tomorrow and send the government a clear message," Anson Chan said.

The activists want full democracy in Hong Kong. As part of its semi-autonomous status under Chinese rule, Hong Kong enjoys Western-style civil liberties, but its leader is chosen by an 800-member committee with a pro-Beijing bias. The 60-member legislature is half-elected, half-chosen by interest groups, many of whom represent the business sector.

## Australian teen finishes round-the-world sail

AP, Sydney

A 16-year-old Australian who braved boat knockdowns and seven months of solitude on a sail around the world set foot on dry land outside the Sydney Opera House yesterday and quickly set an earthier goal: getting her driver's license.

Jessica Watson became the youngest person to sail around the globe solo, non-stop and unassisted when she cruised into Sydney Harbour in her pink, 34-foot (10-meter) yacht to a rock star welcome of thousands. She successfully manoeuvred her boat through raging storms, 40-foot (12-meter) waves and seven knockdowns during the 23,000 nautical mile journey that critics thought she wouldn't survive.

After standing on land for the first time in 210 days, the teen said she's eager to learn how to drive a car, to eat fresh fruit and salad after months of packaged meals, get a full night's sleep instead of catnaps and shake off her sea legs with a long walk on the beach.



## Iran allows French academic to return home

AFP, Tehran

A French researcher arrested in Iran in July for allegedly participating in demonstrations against the disputed presidential election, will be allowed to leave the country soon after a large fine was paid, her lawyer told AFP yesterday.

Referring to Clotilde Reiss, lawyer Mohammad Ali Mahdavi Sabet said a court had issued a ruling that "allows her to leave Iran. There has been a court verdict which is not an acquittal but will enable her to leave the country."



A "Red Shirt" anti government protester uses a slingshot in a street as they face Thai soldiers during ongoing clashes in Bangkok yesterday. Raging violence in the Thai capital claimed eight more lives as gunfire and explosions echoed around tense streets.

PHOTO: AFP

## Karzai, Cameron agree to strengthen ties in first meeting

AFP, London

David Cameron agreed his new government had to strengthen Britain's ties with Kabul as he met Afghan President Hamid Karzai yesterday in his first meeting with a foreign leader as prime minister.

Karzai, on his way home from Washington, stopped off in Britain to meet Cameron, whose new government has put Afghanistan top of its foreign policy agenda.

The visit was the first to Britain by an international leader since Cameron's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took office on Tuesday, following the May 6 general election.

"President Karzai is visiting the United Kingdom and clearly wants to meet the prime minister as one of his early meetings," a Downing Street spokeswoman told AFP.

"Clearly it's an important meeting for the prime minister to meet President Karzai considering the importance of the Afghan mission and our involvement there in the campaign."

The meeting came the day after Britain's new Foreign Secretary William Hague met US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington for talks dominated by

Afghanistan.

The president is to hold a "peace jirga" meeting of Afghanistan's tribal and community leaders at the end of the month.

Karzai and Cameron met at Chequers, the prime minister's country residence, northwest of London.

"The prime minister was delighted to invite President Karzai to Chequers, the first formal visit by an international leader since the election," a spokesman for Downing Street said.

"They discussed President Karzai's very successful visit to Washington, and the prospects for the peace jirga in Afghanistan at the end of May."

"Both the president and prime minister agreed that the relationship between Afghanistan and Britain should be further strengthened."

"The president and the prime minister expressed their admiration for the courage and skill of the British military in Afghanistan, and the sacrifices that British forces have made."

Britain has around 10,000 troops in Afghanistan, largely battling Taliban insurgents in southern Helmand Province. It has lost 285 personnel since operations began in late 2001.

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