

Taliban show defiance with attacks on Nato bases

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban said yesterday they were behind an attack on Nato's main base in southern Afghanistan, the third on international forces in a week, showing their determination to meet fire with fire.

As US and Nato troops escalate operations against the militants in their heartland of Kandahar province, the Taliban are making good on threats of a nationwide campaign against targets allied with the Kabul government.

"We attacked Kandahar air base with rockets last night," Yousuf Ahmadi, a Taliban spokesman, told AFP by phone from an undisclosed location.

The attack in Kandahar was the third on international forces in a matter of days after a suicide attack in the capital on Tuesday and an attack on Bagram Airfield, about 60 kilometres (35 miles) north of Kabul, the following day.

Seven hours of fighting at Bagram resulted in the deaths of an American contract worker and 16 militants, Nato said. Nine Nato soldiers were wounded.

Earlier this month the Taliban announced a new nationwide campaign of attacks in Afghanistan, targeting diplomats, Afghan parliamentarians and foreign contractors, as well as foreign forces.

Ahmadi said that one rocket landed near a shopping strip on the Kandahar Airfield (KAF), another near a helicopter-landing zone.

The attack had caused "massive damage," he said, adding that the militants had killed 13 foreign soldiers and wounded many others.

Air accident puts focus on infrastructure, safety

REUTERS, New Delhi

An air crash in India that killed 158 people has underlined fears about safety gaps in the country's booming airline industry and raised doubts about whether infrastructure can keep pace with rapid economic growth.

It was not clear what caused Saturday's crash, but pilots and aviation experts say regulatory oversight of safety and quality control are often poor. Staff training standards are also falling, they say.

Although India has had few major accidents in recent years, some half a dozen mid-air misses over the past year has underscored that safety issues exist.

Last year an Indian Airlines plane with about 150 passengers on board barely avoided a collision with an army helicopter that was part of the Indian president's entourage in Mumbai.

Indian media regularly reports about routine checks finding pilots reporting drunk for duty and in one instance last year pilots and crew were involved in a mid-air scuffle, leaving the aircraft to fly on its own for sometime.

"The Air India Express crash was waiting to happen," said A Ranganathan, an airline safety consultant and pilot instructor.

"Safety standards in Indian aviation have been on the wane for the last five years. Efforts being made to correct the drift, but the systematic rot is so deep ... we are not likely to see any improvement in safety unless drastic changes are made."

Sustained robust growth has put more money in people's pockets, spurring air travel and an exponential growth in the number of low cost airlines. Domestic passenger traffic has tripled and international traffic doubled in the past five years.

But infrastructure may not have kept pace and a shortage of staff may be stretching both airlines and traffic control staff. Indian Commercial Pilot Association said in a statement 78 percent of crashes took place due to fatigue-

INDIA AIR TRAGEDIES

January 1, 1978: AI-XY5 flight crashed into Arabian Sea, killing 213.

June 21, 1982: AI-403 flight crashed in Mumbai airport, killing 17 out of 111 passengers and crew members.

October 19, 1988: IC-113 flight crashed in Ahmedabad, killing 124 out of 129 passengers.

February 14, 1990: AI flight IC-605 crashed in Bangalore, killing 92 out of 146 passengers.

August 16, 1991: IC-257 crashed in Imphal, killing 69.

April 26, 1993: IC-491 crashed at Aurangabad airport in Maharashtra, killing 55 of 118 passengers.

November 12, 1996: Saudi Arabian Airlines Flight collided midair with Kazakhstan Airlines Flight 1907 near Charki Dadril in Haryana, all 349 on board were killed.

July 17, 2000: Alliance Air flight CD-7412 crashed in Patna Airport, killing 60 passengers.

September 4, 2009: One of the engine of AI-829 caught fire in Mumbai airport, 21 people received minor injuries.

Source: Hindustan Times

related human error.

"You also need to augment the strength of air traffic control which is stretched," Kapil Kaul, head of the Centre for Asia-Pacific Aviation in South Asia, told Reuters.

DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN

The hill-top airport at Mangalore, site of Saturday's crash, had other geographical challenges, and critics say the runway, though adequate for landing the Boeing 737 that crashed, was not

long or wide enough to leave any room for error.

"This was no accident, but the direct result of the deliberate failure of officials at the high levels," said a statement of Environment Support Group, which had sought to block the construction of the runway.

While it was yet to be established if the accident was related to wider problems in India's aviation industry, experts say a lack of training, overworked staff and inadequate infrastructure only compounds the situation.

For instance, only seven radars serve Indian air space and only big airports have the latest low-visibility landing systems, a senior official of the Airports Authority of India told Reuters.

"A disaster was waiting to happen and we have been very lucky to have had no major accidents in the past 10 years," the official involved with aviation security said on condition of anonymity because of the issue's sensitivity.

In April 2008, then director general of civil aviation, Kanu Gohain, told the Mint newspaper that India had just three inspectors for 10 commercial airlines and 600 planes.

That number has now gone up, but many remain under-trained and a backlog of lapsed inspections may take years to clear.

A 2006 safety audit by the International Civil Aviation Organisation listed India as worst on "technical personnel qualification and training."

As the airline sector expanded, a shortage of pilots was met by hiring foreign pilots, some 565 of them flying now. But the government has ordered airlines to replace them with Indians by next summer, raising concerns about how the country will be able to produce enough qualified pilots so quickly.

There are also calls to make inquiries into air accidents transparent. "To my knowledge in the last 50 years no inquiry report has been made public," Kaul said. "There is also the need for an independent safety board."

An Indian loses 16 relatives in Mangalore crash

AFP, Dubai

An Indian man lost 16 family members who were travelling home to attend the funeral of another relative in the Dubai-Mangalore crash of an Air India airliner, the Khaleej Times reported yesterday.

Samir Sheikh lost his wife, two children, uncle and 12 other relatives in Saturday's crash, in which only eight of the 166 people on board survived.

The 16 people were travelling to India to attend the funeral of Sheikh's grandmother who died on Friday, Khaleej Times said.

Sheikh, a Saudi Arabia-based businessman, was in Mumbai and waiting to travel

to Mangalore at the time of the crash.

The Air India Express Boeing 737-800 careered off the "table-top" runway after touching down at Mangalore's Bajpe airport and ploughed into a forested gorge, bursting into flames.

Harpreet Singh, Air India's emergency response coordinator, said at a press briefing in Mumbai yesterday that all 158 bodies had been recovered, and 87 had been identified and claimed by relatives.

United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan sent a message of condolence to Indian President Pratibha Patil on Saturday, the official WAM news agency reported.



Relatives of air crash victims and medical staff carry an empty coffin to the mortuary at the Government Wenlock Hospital in Mangalore yesterday. Investigators sifted through the charred wreckage of an Indian passenger plane that overshot the runway and plunged into a ravine, killing 158 people on board.



Japan PM apologises over Okinawa U-turn

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama yesterday apologised for breaking his election pledge to relocate an unpopular US military base on Okinawa, which had soured ties with Washington.

The prime minister faced angry protests during a visit to Okinawa from residents who had hoped to see the US Marine Corps' Futenma Air Station moved off the southern island.

Hatoyama met with the Okinawa governor and apologised for breaking his election promise to relocate the base.

"I apologise to people in Okinawa as I could not keep to my word that I'll relocate the base off the prefecture," Hatoyama said in a meeting with Okinawa governor Hirokazu Nakaima shown on television.

The island hosts the majority of the US troops and military bases in Japan.

"After holding a number of talks within Japan and with the United States, I reached the conclusion that I have to ask Okinawans about relocating the Futenma base within Okinawa -- specifically speaking, in the Henoko district," in a quiet coastal area of the island, Hatoyama told Nakaima.

A grim-faced governor replied: "I cannot help but say that the plan of relocating to Henoko is very regrettable and very difficult."

Hundreds of people protested outside the prefecture building, holding banners saying, "We are angry" and some chanting "Hatoyama go home!"

Japanese and US negotiators had agreed that the base would be relocated on Okinawa rather than moved elsewhere, in line with an agreement by previous conservative governments in Tokyo and Washington, reports said yesterday.

Hatoyama met with his ministers and confirmed the agreement before his visit to Okinawa, they said.

Relations with the United States have been strained since the centre-left premier took power last September after a landslide poll victory, pledging to move the base off Okinawa, scrapping a 2006 deal between the previous conservative government and Washington.

The administration of US President Barack Obama has urged Hatoyama to stick with the original pact, arguing a strong US military presence is crucial for the defence of Japan and stability in the wider Asia-Pacific region.

As the search for an alternative site in Japan has proved fruitless, Hatoyama this month backtracked on his pledge to move the base off the island, instead sticking with the 2006 pact agreed with Washington to relocate it within Okinawa.

Hatoyama told the Okinawa governor "as the prime minister, I have to say that I can't allow the deterrent power of the US forces in Japan, including the Marine Corps, to decline, given that the security environment in East Asia remains fragile."

His comments came after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her Japanese counterpart Katsuya Okada condemned North Korea Friday after a multinational panel blamed it for a deadly torpedo attack on a South Korean warship.

Last month, nearly 100,000 protesters attended a rally on Okinawa to demonstrate against a US air base. And last Sunday, thousands of people formed a human chain surrounding the Futenma air base to demand the closure of the unpopular facility for noise from the facility and friction with the US forces.

Meles set for easy re-election in Ethiopia

AFP, Addis Ababa

Ethiopians began voting in legislative elections yesterday as Prime Minister Meles Zenawi appeared set to extend his 19-year-old rule over sub-Saharan Africa's second most populous country.

With the country's most charismatic opposition figure in prison and what rights groups have criticised as shrinking political freedom in recent years, the 55-year-old strongman seemed assured of being comfortably re-elected.

Polling stations started opening at 6:00am (0300 GMT) for the vast Horn of Africa nation's 32 million registered voters to elect the 547-strong lower House of Representatives, as well as regional councillors who in turn will pick the upper chamber of parliament.

The opposition scored its best results in 2005 and alleged afterwards that Meles' regime stole the election, sparking violence that left 193 protesters and seven policemen dead.

The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has promised that the fourth multi-party legislative polls would be free and fair.

But Human Rights Watch has charged that Meles has taken tough measures to avoid a repeat of the "mistakes" that nearly cost him victory in 2005.

"The Ethiopian government is waging a coordinated and sustained attack on political opponents, journalists, and rights activists ahead of the May 2010 elections," the watchdog said in the run-up to the polls.

Birtukan Mideksa, the 36-year-old woman who emerged from the 2005 electoral chaos as Ethiopia's most inspirational opposition figure, is serving a life sentence in jail.

"In the true communist tradition, we fear that the government is seeking to weaken her in prison to ensure she no longer poses any political threat," Negasso Gidada, vice chairman of Birtukan's party, told AFP.



Meles Zenawi

Iran to ditch fuel plan if new US sanctions

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran will abandon an atomic fuel swap plan brokered by Turkey and Brazil if the United States imposes new sanctions on the Islamic state, Iran's parliament speaker said yesterday.

In remarks broadcast on state-owned IRIB, Ali Larijani said Tehran could also review its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"If the Americans want to seek adventure, whether in the U.N Security Council or in the US Congress, all the efforts of Turkey and Brazil will be in vain and this path will be abandoned," said Larijani, an influential conservative.

"In this situation parliament will make a different decision over Iran's cooperation with the IAEA."

Thai PM extends curfew, no polls until unrest over

AP, Bangkok

Thailand's prime minister yesterday extended a nighttime curfew in the capital and said he will consider early elections only after the violence that has wracked the nation for the past two months is completely over.

Elections are seen as a key step toward healing the deep divide that has split Thailand between supporters of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and the so-called Red Shirts, who are made up mainly of the urban and rural poor and see Abhisit's government as elitist and illegitimate.

The rift with the Red Shirts, who have strong support in the country's north and northeast, came to a crescendo of violence after they occupied the heart of Bangkok, sparking a military crackdown that ended in a rampage of grenade attacks and arson at dozens of buildings, including the country's stock exchange and biggest shopping mall.

In all, 85 people were killed in the violence -- the worst the Thai capital has seen in decades.

Abhisit said in a weekly address that while he is still willing to call elections before his term expires late next year, he will not do so under the threat of violence.

He accused Red Shirt followers of planning further mayhem, although he stressed the government was in control and the capital has largely returned to normal after a final push by the military to clear the main protest site on Wednesday left 16 dead and more than 100 injured.

Hillary arrives in Beijing for talks on trade, security

AFP, Beijing

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrived in Beijing yesterday ahead of talks with Chinese leaders on trade issues and security threats including renewed tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Clinton flew into the capital from Shanghai, where she had toured the World Expo site, and was scheduled to attend a state dinner hosted by Dai Bingguo, a member of China's State Council, or cabinet.

Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, who arrived earlier yesterday, open two days of talks today with Dai and State Councillor Wang Qishan under the annual Strategic and Economic Dialogue, the highest-level bilateral forum.

Korean tensions have leapt to the top of the agenda after a multinational panel said on Thursday that evidence indicated a North Korean submarine torpedoed the South Korean navy corvette Cheonan in March, killing 46 sailors.

Clinton was expected to seek Beijing's



Hillary Clinton

cooperation in backing a response against North Korea, which is heavily dependent on trade and diplomatic support from its neighbour and closest ally, China.

Speaking yesterday in Shanghai, Clinton emphasised the importance of China and the United States working together on such issues.

"Virtually every major challenge that we face in the world requires China and the United States to work together," she said.

Pyeongyang rejected the investigators' findings and launched threats of war if it is punished by the international community. China has called for restraint and

said it would study the investigators' report.

The findings drew world condemnation of North Korea, but Beijing's support is seen as key for any UN action targeting its isolated neighbour. China is one of the five veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council.

Relations between Washington and Beijing have improved recently after a rocky patch earlier in the year over US arms sales to Taiwan, Obama's White House meeting with the Dalai Lama, Internet freedom and trade disputes.

But the two sides were expected to take up contentious trade and investment issues ranging from US calls for reform of the yuan currency to recent tit-for-tat punitive trade actions.

Some in the US Congress accuse Beijing of keeping its currency artificially low to boost its exports.

Chinese industrial policies restricting US and other foreign businesses as well as perennial charges of copyright piracy in the world's most populous nation are also on the agenda.

South Korea to take ship case to UN

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea said yesterday it would take the case of its sunken naval vessel to the UN Security Council in a bid to tighten the economic vice on impoverished North Korea after accusing it of torpedoing the ship.

The March sinking of the Cheonan corvette, killing 46 sailors, has sharply raised tensions on the Korean peninsula, rattled investors in South Korea and threatens to divide major powers in the economically powerful region.

"The president will present frameworks of measures, one about our own steps and the other about measures through international cooperation ... He will also mention a plan to bring the case to the UN Security Council," presidential spokesman Lee Dong-kwan said.