

Foreign, Afghan forces kill 63 insurgents

Interior ministry says

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghan police, backed by US-led troops, have killed dozens of insurgents and seized several tonnes of illegal drugs in an operation in the southern Helmand province, the interior ministry said yesterday.

The two-day operation took place in the Desho district of Helmand, the key drug-producing region of Afghanistan, which is the world's leading supplier of heroin. The province is a bastion of Taliban insurgents being targeted by US-led forces.

New Interior Minister Besmillah Mohammadi said in a statement the operation, in which the security forces killed 63 insurgents and seized more than 16 tonnes of drugs, was a "big achievement."

The ministry gave no further details and did not say if there were any casualties among Afghan and US soldiers.

The Taliban could not be reached immediately for comment.



Honours play the Afghan national anthem during a change of command ceremony attended by US General David Petraeus, commander of Nato forces in Afghanistan, at ISAF Headquarters in Kabul yesterday. General Petraeus formally took up his new role of Afghan war commander during a ceremony yesterday at Nato headquarters in Kabul, saying the campaign faced "a critical moment".

PHOTO: AFP

DR CONGO BLAST

Victims buried in mass graves

BBC ONLINE

The bodies of some of the scores of people killed in a fuel truck explosion in the Democratic Republic of Congo have been buried in mass graves.

At least 230 people were killed when the overturned oil tanker exploded and sparked a fire in Sange village.

Some of those who died were trying to collect leaking fuel but others were trapped inside buildings, including a cinema, by the blaze.

UN peacekeepers, aid workers and troops have been helping the injured.

As Saturday wore on, Red Cross teams carried bodies wrapped in plastic sheeting to two mass graves outside the village, the Associated Press reports.

Jean-Claude Kibala, South Kivu's vice-governor, said scenes in the village were "terrible".

AFRICA'S FUEL CURSE

2006: A pipeline explodes near Lagos in Nigeria when it is opened to steal fuel, killing 284 people.

2006: A pipeline blast kills up to 200 people at Ido Beach, a village near Lagos, Nigeria.

2000: A tanker bursts into flames on crashing in Nigeria, killing 200 people.

1998: More than 1,000 people die in an explosion near Warri in Nigeria when a pipeline valve is opened to steal fuel.

1998: Up to 220 people die and 63 are injured when two wagons explode following a train derailment in Cameroon's commercial capital, Yaounde.

Source: Aljazeera

"There are lots of dead bodies on the streets. The population is in terrible shock - no-one is crying or speaking," he said.

WARNING IGNORED

The accident happened late on Friday in Sange, about 70km south of the town of Bukavu in South Kivu, near the border with Burundi.

The truck, travelling from Tanzania, overturned and began leaking fuel.

"Petrol began to leak out but instead of fleeing people came to collect the fuel," Tondo Sahizira, 28, told AFP news agency.

"A few minutes later there was an explosion, flames burst from the truck and spread very quickly."

Bedide Mwasha said that five Pakistani peacekeepers had urged people to leave the area "but people refused to leave".

New US commander finds Afghan war at critical stage

Petraeus takes charge of battlefield

REUTERS, Kabul

The nine-year war in Afghanistan has reached a critical stage, US General David Petraeus said yesterday, as he formally took command of the 150,000-strong Nato-led force fighting a deadly Taliban insurgency.

"We are engaged in a tough fight. After years of war we have arrived at a critical moment," Petraeus told guests at a change-of-command ceremony at the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul.

Petraeus was last week appointed to lead all foreign forces in Afghanistan after his predecessor, General Stanley McChrystal, was dismissed for insulting remarks he and aides made about the US

administration in a magazine interview. The change of command comes at a time when the Taliban are at their strongest since being overthrown in 2001, with ISAF casualties mounting daily.

Petraeus, wearing camouflage fatigues and speaking near a marble column dedicated to ISAF forces who have died in the Afghan campaign, said his appointment signalled a change in command, not strategy.

Petraeus landed in Kabul Friday after his appointment was confirmed by the US Senate and the US House of Representatives approved \$33 billion (21.7 billion pound) in funding for a troop surge he hopes will turn the tide of the war.

The surge will bring to 150,000 the number of foreign troops in Afghanistan

just as a new strategy takes root. It entails tackling the Taliban in their strongholds while relying on the government to simultaneously improve local governance and development.

Petraeus's appointment could be a last throw of the dice for Washington to end an increasingly costly conflict that is draining Western budgets as they emerge from one of the worst global recessions in history.

He is charged with not only winning the war against a growing Taliban insurgency, but also with starting a withdrawal of US forces from July next year.

"We must demonstrate to the Afghan people and to the world that al Qaeda and its network of extremist allies will not be allowed to once again establish sanctuaries in Afghanistan," he said.

Poles begin voting in tight presidential run-off

REUTERS, Warsaw

Poles began voting yesterday in a presidential election run-off that will help decide the speed and scale of economic reforms and set the tone for Warsaw's ties with its European Union partners and with Russia.

Billed as Poland's strangest election since the fall of communism in 1989, it was called after the death of President Lech Kaczynski and many other top officials in a plane crash in Russia on April 10.

The election pits Kaczynski's twin brother Jaroslaw, the combative eurosceptic leader of the main right-wing opposition party, against Bronislaw Komorowski, candidate of Poland's ruling pro-business Civic Platform (PO).

Most opinion polls have predicted a Komorowski victory but usually underestimate the amount of support for Kaczynski, who has been narrowing the gap in recent weeks and lagged by just five percentage points in a first round of voting on June 20.

A final slew of polls published on Friday, the last day of campaigning, showed the candidates level pegging or Komorowski with a small lead.

In Poland, the government led by the prime minister sets policy, but the president can propose and veto laws, appoints many key officials and has a say in foreign and security policy.

Polling stations opened at 6:00am local time and were due to close at 8:00pm. Exit polls showing the final estimated results will be published as soon as voting ends.

Around 30 million Poles in a total population of 38 million are eligible to vote. Turnout in the first round was 54 per cent.

MARKET FEARS

Financial markets favour a Komorowski presidency, expecting him to work smoothly with Prime Minister Donald Tusk's market-oriented government as it tries to rein in a big budget deficit while keeping a fragile economic recovery on track.



Hezbollah 'mentor' Fadlallah dies in Lebanon

BBC ONLINE

Lebanon's top Shia Muslim cleric, seen as a key figure in the founding of militant group Hezbollah, has died at the age of 74.

Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah was regarded as Hezbollah's spiritual guide after the group was founded in 1982, a charge both denied.

An implacable critic of the US, he had a wide following among Shias and backed the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

But he was known among Shias for his moderate social views.

He held particularly progressive views on the role of women in Islamic society.

The ayatollah had been ill for weeks, reports said, and was too frail to deliver his weekly sermon at Friday prayers.

He was admitted to hospital on Friday, reportedly suffering from internal bleeding. As news of his death emerged, Hezbollah's TV station, al-Manar, interrupted its programming to broadcast his picture and recitations from the Koran.

Medical sources at Beirut's Behnam hospital told news agencies Fadlallah had died, before a spokesman for the cleric emerged from the hospital to confirm the reports.

In the suburb of Haret Hreik, where the ayatollah preached at the al-Hassanayn mosque, black banners were hung in mourning and women wept openly in the street, the Associated Press reported.

Born to Lebanese parents in the Shia holy city of Najaf, in Iraq, Fadlallah moved to Lebanon in 1966 after completing his studies.

He won followers both in his home country and in Lebanon, extending his influence to Central Asia and the Gulf, Reuters reported.

Hopes ride on oil skimmer in Gulf of Mexico

AP, New Orleans

The latest hopes are riding on a massive new skimmer to clean oil from near the spewing well in the Gulf of Mexico, while a local Louisiana parish's plan to block the slick has been rejected by federal officials.

A 48-hour test of the Taiwanese vessel dubbed "A Whale" began Saturday and was to continue through yesterday. TMT Shipping created what is billed as the world's largest oil skimmer by converting an oil tanker after the April 20 explosion sent millions of gallons of crude spilling into the Gulf.

The vessel was expected to cruise a 25-square-mile test site just north of the Macondo Deepwater well site, company officials said. The US Coast Guard and BP are waiting to see if the vessel, which is 10 stories high and as long as 3 1/2 football fields, can live up to its makers' promise of being able to process up to 21 million gallons of oil-fouled water a day.

The ship works by taking in water through 12 vents, separating the oil and pumping the cleaned seawater back into the Gulf.

"In many ways, the ship collects water like an actual whale and pumps internally like a human heart," TMT spokesman Bob Grantham said in an e-mail.

A Whale is being tested close to the wellhead because officials believe it will be most effective where the oil is thickest rather than closer to shore.

The ship arrived in the Gulf on Wednesday, but officials have wanted to test its capability as well as have the federal Environmental Protection Agency sign off on the water it will pump back into the Gulf, which will contain trace amounts of crude.

The wait has frustrated some local officials, who say the mammoth skimmer would be a game-changer in keeping oil from reaching vulnerable coastlines.

During a Thursday tour of the inlet to Barataria Bay, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal said it was exasperating to have A Whale anchored offshore instead of being put to immediate use.



Students protest at the US embassy in Manila yesterday to mark American Independence Day. The protesters were demanding the pullout of US forces deployed in the southern Philippines for joint anti-terror training exercises.

PHOTO: AFP

China mudslide toll 42, with 57 still missing

AFP, Beijing

Hundreds of rescue workers have dug up the bodies of 42 people killed in a rain-triggered landslide in southwest China, with hopes for 57 others missing all but gone, state press said yesterday.

Rescuers were digging through the debris of the June 28 landslide that buried scores of homes in Dazhai village, Guizhou province, with scant hope of finding survivors, Xinhua news agency said.

More than 100,000 cubic metres of mud and rocks, the equivalent of 40 Olympic-size swimming pools, engulfed the buildings and homes in the village, state press reports have said.

One report said that up to 45 of the missing or dead were children left in the village by their migrant worker parents, who had departed the remote rural region in search of jobs.

Many of the other victims were elderly people who had been charged with taking care of the children, mostly born after 1995, it said.

Local officials have refused to confirm such reports when contacted by AFP.

Sunday's toll was up from 26 dead and 73 missing reported on Saturday.

Much of south and central China has been hit by severe rains that have triggered floods, landslides, dyke breaches and other related disasters.

According to Xinhua news agency, 266 people were confirmed dead and 199 missing following the torrential rains from June 13 to 29, including those earlier listed as missing in Guizhou.

AP reports, More than 700 rescuers and 26 excavators were digging at the site of the landslide in Dazhai village of Guizhou province, Xinhua said. Homes were buried on June 28 when nearly half a hill apparently collapsed after days of torrential rain.

The landslide is about 120 miles southwest of Guiyang, the provincial capital.

So far there have been no signs of life, Xinhua cited search team chief Pu Jianjiang as saying.

IMMIGRATION TACKLE Australia PM

vows no 'political correctness'

AFP, Sydney

Australia's new Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday vowed not to let "political correctness" get in the way of tackling immigration, signalling a tough line on the issue.

Gillard, who ruthlessly deposed former leader Kevin Rudd and solved the mining tax row that weakened him a week later, said people should not be called racist for raising concerns about asylum seekers.

Gillard, whose parents emigrated to Australia in 1966, has made it a top priority to slow the steady flow of asylum seeker boats that plagued the Rudd government.

Testing the international community

NEWS ANALYSIS

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Israel's actions and demonstrations have been held around the world. And despite Israeli propaganda, Israel is growing increasingly isolated. But, if similar acts are to be prevented from happening in the future, Israel must now be punished by the international community according to international law. This is a juristic and ethical necessity.

The international community's prestige is derived from its commitment to ethics. Similarly, international law is based upon the principle of power balance, norms, agreements, and the teachings and doctrines of law and ethics. One must regard Israel's use of brutal force against the aid flotilla as inconsistent with the jus cogens of international law, which prohibits the use of force.

The humanitarian aspect of the incident must also not be forgotten. For the purpose of the flotilla was not only to deliver aid to the people of Gaza but to break the silence over the suffering of the Strip's 1.5 million people. By attacking an aid flotilla that had children on board, Israel contravened armed

international law, which prohibits harming women and children. This offers another example of Israel's willingness to ruthlessly commit humanitarian crimes against women and children.

BETRAYING JEWISH HISTORY
By murdering Turkish citizens, Israel has not only attacked the international community, it has also betrayed Jewish history. Turkey has a long history of protecting and embracing Jews and Jewish intellectuals and, more broadly society, must now question this. Perhaps by doing so, the Israeli government can be stopped from taking a path from which there can be no turning back.

However, it is interesting to note that Egypt and other Arab countries, which used to keep the door of welfare closed to the Gaza Strip, have now opened it. This makes us consider the US-Israel-Egypt triad's influence on the blockade.

When Barack Obama, the US president, came to power, everyone expected to see differences between the new administration and that of George Bush, his predecessor.

By Abdulkadir Emin Onen