

Roadside bombs kill eight Afghan civilians

AFP, Kabul

Roadside bombs ripped through two vehicles yesterday in southern Afghanistan, killing eight civilians and wounding seven others, police said.

A minibus was hit by an improvised explosive device (IED) in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, which killed five civilians and wounded another six, Daud Ahmadi, spokesman for the provincial governor, told AFP. "Two children and three elders were killed and another six were wounded in the blast," he said.

Nato forces said their helicopter was targeted by small arms fire as they were evacuating the wounded for treatment, the alliance said in a statement.

In a similar incident in Shamulzayi district of neighbouring Zabul province a tractor was hit by a roadside bomb which killed three people and wounded another, deputy provincial police chief Ghulam Jailani Farahi told AFP.

Civilian death 'on the rise' in Afghanistan

BBC NEWS

More than 1,000 Afghan civilians were killed in armed violence and security incidents in the first six months of 2010, a new Afghan study says.

Afghanistan Rights Monitor says 1,074 civilians were killed between January and June - an increase compared with the same period in 2009.

However, the number of people killed in Nato air strikes in the same period has halved, the report says.

Changes to rules of engagement helped reduce that figure, the report says.

Former Nato commander Gen Stanley McChrystal issued instructions in 2009 severely limiting the circumstances in which troops could call in an air strike or fire into buildings.

The newly arrived coalition international forces commander, Gen David Petraeus, has vowed to carry on with the policy.

Violence in Afghanistan is now at its worst since the conflict began in 2001, the report says. "The Afghan people have only witnessed and suffered an intensifying armed conflict over the past six months and insurgency has become more resilient, multi-structured and deadly," it adds.

Violence has soared across Afghanistan in recent months, with 212 civilians killed during June alone, Afghanistan Rights Monitor says.

Most of the deaths documented by the report were caused by insurgents, the report notes, with the widespread use of roadside bombs particularly deadly, killing almost 300 civilians.

Suicide bombs were also a major cause of death, the organisation said.

It does acknowledge that Nato-led forces have been trying hard to reduce civilian casualties, partly in response to pressure from the Afghan government.

And the new counter-insurgency strategy introduced by Gen McChrystal does seem to have had some effect, the report says.

According to its data, 94 Afghans were killed in air strikes between January and June 2010 - compared to 207 for the previous year.

In all 210 civilians had died in the past six months as a result of Nato-led strikes, shootings and raids, the report said.

"Dozens of people, including women and children, were shot dead during violent and barbaric intrusions, raids into houses and other counter-insurgency operations by US-Nato forces," the report's authors say.

Whilst the deaths of foreign soldiers often make headlines, the widespread deaths of Afghan civilians receive much less attention.

The United Nations has also charted rising civilian deaths in Afghanistan - it says 2,400 people were killed in 2009, up from 2,118 in 2008.



Pakistan's army chief General Ashfaq Kayani, right, talks with Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan US General David Petraeus during a meeting in Rawalpindi yesterday. Petraeus arrived in Kabul early to take over Nato's 47-nation ISAF from US General Stanley McChrystal, sacked last month by Obama for insubordination.

Noth Korea to hold warship talks with US

BBC ONLINE

Officials from North Korea and the US-led UN Command are to meet for talks about the sinking of a South Korean warship, the UN Command has said.

The meeting to be held today in the truce village of Panmunjom is aimed at paving the way for future higher-level discussions.

It comes days after the UN Security Council condemned the sinking but fell short of blaming North Korea.

The warship, the Cheonan, went down on 26 March with the loss of 46 lives.

International investigators said a North Korean torpedo sank the ship.

Pyongyang denies responsibility for the incident, which happened near the disputed inter-Korean maritime border.

UGANDA BLAST

Signs point to Somali war blowback

NEWS ANALYSIS

REUTERS, Uganda

Devastating bombings in Uganda are likely to have been the work of al-Qaeda-allied Somali militants seeking to wreck a regional challenge to their growing hold on the failed Horn of Africa state.

On Sunday, suspected Somali militants carried out two bomb attacks in the Ugandan capital that ripped through two bars packed with soccer fans watching the final moments of World Cup final in an Ethiopian-themed restaurant and at a gathering in a rugby club in Kampala.

The top suspect in the Sunday night blasts, which killed over 64 among World Cup soccer fans in Kampala, is the Somali armed group al-Shabaab. Analysts said that if that turns out to be the case, then this will have been its first foreign strike.

The change of tactics, the theory goes, would have been decided in order to press home in the most dramatic way the group's opposition to an

African Union peacekeeping mission it sees as Western-inspired.

A Western intelligence source said it was reasonable to see the force as the top suspect, in part because it had threatened Uganda for its participation in the African mission to end Somalia's two decades of war, chaos and periodic famine.

"Shabaab is clearly no longer a parochial threat," said Henry Wilkinson, of Janusian Security consultants in London.

"It's potentially a very important development because the attack, if it was carried out by them, shows they can strike far away from their operational centre of gravity."

The possibility of al-Shabaab's involvement is especially worrying since the group contains several al-Qaeda men who have contributed to the global network's anti-Western campaign.

These include high profile al-Qaeda suspects like Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, indicted for his alleged role in the 1998 Kenya and Tanzania U.S. embassy bombings that killed 240 people.

Spain set to receive Cuban dissidents today

BBC, Online

The first group of dissidents freed by the Cuban government is set to arrive in Madrid on a scheduled flight today, Spanish officials said.

It was still not clear how many would be on the first flight, an official at the Spanish foreign ministry said.

Last week, the Cuban government, the Catholic Church and the visiting Spanish foreign minister agreed a deal to secure the release of 52 dissidents.

The authorities have gathered several political prisoners and their families at separate locations in Havana.

A Spanish foreign ministry official in Madrid said the first freed prisoners were expected to take a scheduled flight from Cuba yesterday evening.

Petraeus in key Pakistan talks

AFP, Islamabad

US General David Petraeus yesterday praised Pakistan's fight against Taliban militants during a key first round of talks in the country since taking command of US-led Nato troops in Afghanistan.

The four-star general, who was credited with turning around the Iraq war, arrived in Afghanistan on July 2 to take over Nato's 47-nation mission from US General Stanley McChrystal, sacked last month by Obama for insubordination.

US and Nato officials said Pakistan is vital to reversing Taliban momentum in Afghanistan, where commanders are scheduled to boost the number of foreign troops to 150,000 in a counter-insurgency push to end the war quickly.

Pakistani troops have fought major campaigns against home-grown Taliban in its northwest, but US officials have put pressure on Islamabad to crack down on groups who stage cross-border attacks against American troops.

Petraeus held talks with Pakistan's army chief of staff, General Ashfaq Kayani, in the garrison city of Rawalpindi yesterday, US and Pakistani officials said.

"Recent events demonstrate both the common threat posed to Pakistan and Afghanistan by insurgents and the efforts that the Pakistan military are making to counter this threat," said Petraeus.

"I look forward to continuing to work with General Kayani to identify areas of mutual interest and to cooperate in efforts that can help improve regional security," he added.



Polanski extradition rejected

AFP, Geneva

Swiss authorities said that Roman Polanski was a free man yesterday after rejecting a request to extradite the film director to the United States to answer for a child sex case dating back to 1977.

"The Franco-Polish filmmaker will not be extradited to the United States and the measures of restriction on his liberty have been lifted," Justice Minister Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf told reporters at a press conference.



Palestinians attend a protest in Gaza City yesterday calling for the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails.

Nepal heads for fresh polls

IANS, Kathmandu

The turbulent republic of Nepal headed towards fresh prime ministerial elections yesterday, the third in two years, as its disgraced parties failed to lay aside differences over power sharing.

Since the resignation of Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal on June 30, the country has been under the rule of a caretaker government with the three major parties locking horns for the premier's post and failing to name a candidate acceptable to all the 25 parliamentary parties.

Yesterday, the deadline given by President Ram Baran Yadav to form an all-party government expires. This is the second failed deadline

after the grappling parties were unable to meet an earlier one last week and sought for more time.

Now with the president unlikely to grant yet another extension, it is likely that he will call for an election this week when the 601-member parliament will choose a new prime minister on the basis of simple majority.

Though Narayan Kaji Shrestha, deputy chief of the opposition Maoists, said his party will hold yet another round of negotiations with the two major ruling parties, the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal - Unified Marxist Leninist (UML), it is nearly impossible that the three can extract out a bargain at the last moment.

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East Timor parliament rejects Australia's refugee plan

BBC ONLINE

East Timor's parliament has unanimously rejected a proposal by Australia's new prime minister that the tiny country host a refugee processing centre.

All 34 lawmakers voted against Julia Gillard's plan for a centre that would assess the claims of asylum seekers who set out for Australia by boat.

East Timor's president has said he is open to negotiation, but the decision-making power rests with the government.

Australia currently processes refugees on Christmas Island. However, the detention centre in the Indian Ocean is overcrowded and many asylum seekers have been moved to the mainland while their applications are assessed.

'VERY UNLIKELY'

The overwhelming rejection of the so-called East Timor Solution is a huge setback to Julia Gillard's plan.

East Timor's President Jose Ramos-Horta has said he was open to the idea as long as it was a temporary stop for people before they were resettled in other countries.

However, his role is largely ceremonial. East Timor's Deputy Prime Minister Jose Luis Guterres recently said his country was "very unlikely" to accept the idea.

He suggested Australia had the capacity to deal with its asylum seeker issues internally, or by boosting aid to countries where the refugees come from, primarily Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Gillard appears to have backed away from naming East Timor as the location for such a centre - suggesting she had been misunderstood or misquoted in an earlier speech.

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