

Hillary Clinton arrives in Pakistan for talks

AFP, Islamabad

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrived in Pakistan yesterday for strategic talks aimed at bolstering bilateral ties and securing firm support for the war in Afghanistan.

Clinton is due to hold meetings today with high-level political and military figures to further a "strategic dialogue", and announce details of a huge aid deal aimed at chipping away at anti-American sentiment in Pakistan.

The Secretary of State flew into Islamabad ahead of evening talks with Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and President Asif Ali Zardari.

The aid package to be announced on Monday will be focused on water, energy and health projects, a senior US official said, part of a five-year 7.5 billion-dollar aid package approved by the US Congress last year.

Clinton's visit comes ahead of her trip to Afghanistan tomorrow for a major international donor conference, and as Washington continues to push Islamabad for further steps to rid its western border of Islamist militants.

The United States has long voiced concern that elements of Pakistan's powerful military and intelligence service were supporting Taliban insurgents, despite the government's public anti-terror stance.

But a government adviser travelling with Clinton, Vali Nasr, said a renewed and deeper engagement between the two countries had yielded greater trust on shared security issues.

President Barack Obama's administration has promised to engage more deeply with Pakistan, which has long seen Washington as interested only in securing its military cooperation in the fight against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi will meet Clinton on Monday to reconvene the strategic dialogue started during his visit to Washington in March.

Since March, 13 working groups covering topics ranging from development to defence have been set up to find areas for possible cooperation, and their progress will be reviewed by Clinton and Qureshi.

The US Special Representative for

Pakistan and Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke said the dialogue was delivering important changes to the US-Pakistan relationship.

"The evolution of the strategic dialogue and the fact that we're delivering is producing a change in Pakistani attitude, first in the government, and gradually, more slowly in the public opinion," Holbrooke said.

"This change is of strategic importance because it's enabling us to get to move forward on our additional efforts on counterterrorism and in terms of working together in the tribal areas."

In a statement from his ministry, Qureshi said the new visit "would help give further impetus to the Pakistan-US partnership" and welcomed US engagement in development projects.

A senior US official speaking on condition of anonymity said closer ties with Pakistan's powerful army chief General Ashfaq Kayani were helping in the struggle against the militant Haqqani network, one of the toughest foes faced by foreign forces in Afghanistan.



Pakistani protesters perform an anti-US play in Karachi, as they rally in support of Aafia Siddiqui. The neuro scientist, who is accused of being an al-Qaeda member, is currently in US custody after being found guilty of attempted murder in February 2010. PHOTO: AFP

Australian opposition leader attacks snap election call

BBC ONLINE

Australia's main opposition leader Tony Abbott has criticised the nation's new Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, after she called a snap general election.

Mr Abbott said voters would not be 'conned' by a leader who was running to the polls before she had established her credentials.

Ms Gillard, who leads the ruling Labor Party, earlier announced that elections would be held on 21 August.

She became prime minister in June after ousting her predecessor Kevin Rudd.

"Julia Gillard's recent past is so littered with failures, including the political corpse of an elected prime minister," Mr Abbot said at a meeting of his conservative Liberal Party in Brisbane, Queensland.

He added that Ms Gillard had so far failed to prove that she was able "to lead our nation".

'TOUGHEST FIGHT'
The race between Labor and the Liberal Party is expected to focus on the economy, health, climate change and immigration.

It will be the toughest fight in Ms Gillard's political life, the BBC's Phil Mercer in Sydney

says.

Recent opinion polls give Labor a slight lead over the Liberals and Ms Gillard will be hoping to secure another three-year term, our correspondent adds.

In a televised address in Canberra, the country's first female prime minister admitted that the poll would be "tough and close".

"This election is about the choice as to whether we move Australia forward or go back," Ms Gillard said.

"Moving forward means moving forward with budget surpluses and a stronger economy."

She said that it also "means moving forward with stronger protection of our borders and strong plan, a real plan, that takes away from people-smugglers and the products they sell".

LABOR WRANGLES

Ms Gillard became Australia's prime minister last month after a surprise leadership vote saw Mr Rudd deposed.

Mr Rudd chose not to take part in the ballot, knowing he would suffer an embarrassing defeat to his deputy.

Labor has suffered a sharp drop in support in opinion polls this year.

Suicide bomber wounds several at Pak mosque

AP, Islamabad

A suicide bomber ran past guards at a minority Shia mosque in eastern Pakistan then blew himself up yesterday, wounding several worshippers, officials said.

The attack appeared to be the latest in a string by Sunni extremists against other Muslims they consider infidels.

It took place in Sargodha city, which is in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province and its political heartland.

The region is increasingly coming under attack by al-Qaeda and Taliban militants that have logistics and training centres close to the Afghan border several hundred miles (kilometers) away.

Government official Zulfikar Shah said guards at the mosque tried to stop the suicide attacker, but he evaded them.

Taliban stage daring jailbreak in Afghanistan

Free 14 inmates

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Taliban fighters have freed 14 inmates from a jail in western Afghanistan after staging a daring prison break, police have said.

Mohammad Faqir Askar, a provincial police chief, said the fighters blew up the main gates of the prison in Farah city after planting a bomb on Sunday.

"Twenty prisoners escaped but we arrested six of them soon after the incident and 14 are still at large," Askar said.

He said four other inmates had been injured in the blast at the facility where at least 400 prisoners are currently being jailed.

Askar blamed the blast on Taliban fighters who have been waging a bloody insurgency since they were ousted from power during the US-led invasion nearly

nine years ago.

In November 2009, 13 prisoners escaped from the same prison via a tunnel and in June earlier that year, at least 1,000 Taliban inmates escaped from Sarpoza prison in Kandahar city after a suicide attack blew open the front gates and destroyed the walls.

Also on Sunday, a suicide bomber detonated explosives in central Kabul, killing at least four people and injuring at least 30, according to the Afghan Health Ministry.

"He was trying to get to a specific area but because of high security the bomber was forced to detonate on a street where there is little activity," said Zemarai Bashary, spokesman for the interior ministry.

The attack comes just two days before Kabul is due to host a major interna-

tional donors conference, set to be attended by up to 40 foreign ministers, including US secretary of state Hillary Clinton.

"Security is on track," Bashary said on Saturday.

"We're determined to provide good security for the Kabul Conference."

He said "thousands" of police officers, soldiers and intelligence agents had been deployed "in vulnerable areas" of the Afghan capital as well as remote villages to thwart any Taliban attack plans.

Earlier, Nato announced that international and Afghan forces had foiled a plot to attack the conference.

Several "enemies of the people" were killed and 26 people were arrested in the Friday-night raid in the Kabul neighborhood of Wasel Abad, according to Nato and the Afghan defence ministry.



Young Thai hill tribesmen pray at Wat Benchamopit, also known as the Marble Temple, before a mass ordination, in Bangkok yesterday. About 300 boys gathered to enter monkhood for a period of three months to study Buddhist teaching. PHOTO: REUTERS

Bomb kills 3 in Kabul ahead of conference

KABUL, Afghanistan

A suicide bomber slipped through the Afghan capital's tight security ring yesterday, killing three civilians near a busy market two days ahead of an international conference hosting representatives from about 60 nations, officials said.

An American service member died in a roadside bombing in the south and other weekend attacks left 14 Afghans dead, reports said, as the Taliban meet the arrival of thousands more US troops this year with a rising tide of violence.

The Kabul bomber was on foot near the market and his target was unclear, police official Abdul Ghafar Sayedzada said.

Hospitals reported three civilians killed, including a child, public health official Kabir Amiri said. Health ministry spokesman Gulam Sakhi Kargar said about 45 people were wounded.

University student Tamim Ahmad said he saw a man on foot run up to a passing convoy of international troops and detonate an explosives-laden vest. However, Afghan authorities and Nato said no foreign troops were operating in the area at the time of the attack, which the international force condemned.

"The insurgents have chosen to use violence

to gain media attention, once again at the expense of innocent Afghan civilians," said Col William Maxwell, a top operations official with the Nato-led force.

Security has been tightened across the capital ahead of Tuesday's Kabul Conference, which will be attended by the heads of NATO and the United Nations and top diplomats, including US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. The meeting -- held nearly nine years after US-backed forces toppled the Taliban's regime of extreme Islamic law for sheltering al-Qaeda terrorist leaders -- is to discuss the country's reconstruction and eventual handing over of all security to the Afghan government.

Thousands of Afghan police were setting up checkpoints and patrolling Kabul trying to prevent any insurgent attack on the meeting or its delegates. Afghan and international officials said Saturday that authorities had arrested a Taliban bomb-maker involved in a plot to attack the conference, but they gave no details.

In May, the Taliban briefly disrupted a national peace conference in Kabul with rocket-propelled grenades that landed about 100 yards (meters) from the site of the gathering, and insurgents also waged a gunbattle with police outside the meeting. Three civilians, but no conference delegates, were wounded.

Smuggled rare tortoises seized in Malaysia

BBC ONLINE

Customs officers at Kuala Lumpur airport have found nearly 400 rare tortoises smuggled from Madagascar.

The Radiated and Ploughshare tortoises were on the last leg of their journey to pet shops and possibly cooking pots, Malaysian officials believe.

Also recovered were more than 40 rare tomato frogs.

There are fears that as Madagascar's political problems continue, illegal exportation of the country's animals and plants is on the rise.

It is the second such find in the last month.

Two Malagasy women have been arrested. Officials say the animals were found in their luggage.

Richard Thomas of Traffic International, an organisation trying to stop the illegal trade in exotic animals, said both species of tortoise involved in this case were incredibly rare.

Jobless in Cuba? Communism faces the unthinkable

AP, Havana

At a state project to refurbish a decaying building in Old Havana, one worker paints a wall white while two others watch. A fourth sweeps in a wheelbarrow positioned in a sliver of shade nearby and two more smoke and chat on the curb.

President Raul Castro has startled the nation lately by saying about one in five Cuban workers may be redundant. At the work site on Obispo street, those numbers run in reverse.

It's a common sight in communist Cuba. Here, nearly everyone works for the state and official unemployment is minuscule, but pay is so low that Cubans like to joke "the state pretends to pay us and we pretend to work."

Now, facing a severe budget deficit, the government has hinted at restructuring or trimming its bloated work force. Such talk is causing tension, however, in a country where guaranteed employment was a building block of the 1959 revolution that swept Fidel Castro to power.

Details are sketchy on how and when such pruning would take place. Still, acknowledgment that cuts are needed has come from Raul Castro himself.

"We know that there are hundreds of thousands of unnecessary workers on the budget and labor books, and some analysts calculate that the excess of jobs has surpassed 1 million," said Castro, who replaced his ailing brother Fidel as president nearly four years ago. Cuba's work force totals 5.1 million, in a population of 11.2 million.

In his nationally televised speech in April, Castro also had harsh words for those who do little to deserve their salaries.

"Without people feeling the need to work to make a living, sheltered by state regulations that are excessively paternalistic and irrational, we will never stimulate a love for work," he said.

Indeed, the process of labor reform may already have started, albeit slowly.

Workers in the tourism sector say some of their colleagues have been furloughed during the lean summer months, while others have been reassigned to jobs on state-run farms.

"Since we are now in the low season, the hotel where I work has sent many workers home for two or three months," said Orlando, a chef in Varadero, a sand-and-surf enclave east of Havana.

"It's very hard because you're left with no salary at all," said Orlando, who like almost

all state employees, didn't want his full name used to prevent problems at work. He added, "I'm lucky since I'm still in my job."

Veronica, a receptionist at another Varadero hotel, said she feared she may be sent home in August, when her resort will be only half-occupied.

"Sometimes they offer alternatives, to study in a particular course or another job," she said, "but sometimes, when (workers) are sent into the agricultural sector for instance, they just quit."

With the government giving no details of its thinking, rumours have spread that as many as a fourth of all government workers in some industries could lose their jobs or be moved to farming or construction. But Labor Minister Margarita Gonzalez has promised that "Cuba will not employ massive firings in a manner similar to neoliberal cutbacks," using "neoliberal" as a description of free-market policies.

The government has moved to embrace some small free-market reforms. It handed some barbershops over to employees, allowing them to set their own prices but making them pay rent and buy their own supplies. Authorities have also approved more licenses for private taxis while getting tough on unlicensed ones.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

RAHIMAFROOZ

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