

Pentagon probe into Afghan leaks

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The US defence department has launched a criminal investigation into the leaking of more than 90,000 documents on the war in Afghanistan, amid US government efforts to limit damage from what military officials have described as "dangerous" disclosures.

Speaking at the White House on Tuesday, Barack Obama, the president, said he was concerned about the massive leak, but the papers published by the whistle-blower website Wikileaks on Monday, did not reveal any details that were not already part of the debate.

In his first public comments on the matter, Obama said the disclosure "could potentially jeopardise individuals or operations".

But he added: "While I'm concerned ... the fact is these documents don't reveal any issues that haven't already informed our public debate on Afghanistan."

US politicians on Capitol Hill have been divided over the significance of the documents, with some saying they serve as a wake-up call for the US to leave Afghanistan.

30,000 trapped by floods in China

300 killed in two weeks

AFP, Beijing

More than 30,000 people are thought to be trapped by floodwaters in a town in northeast China, state media said yesterday, as torrential rain that has killed over 300 in two weeks continues.

China is struggling with its worst floods in a decade that have caused at least 22 billion dollars in damage, and authorities have warned of more to come.

In the central city of Wuhan, tens of thousands of people have been evacuated as authorities brace for flood crests from the Yangtze River and one of its tributaries to converge there.

More than 200 rescue workers have been sent to northeastern Jilin province's Kouqian town to reach 30,000 residents thought to be trapped after a nearby reservoir overflowed, the official Xinhua news agency said.

The local train station was also surrounded by water with over 80 people trapped inside, it said.

Factories and houses have been submerged by floods that have reached highs of three metres (10 feet) in some places and residents are trying to escape to higher buildings, the official China News Service reported.

Jilin is the latest province to have been hit by recent deadly floods that have killed 333 people

since July 14 and left another 300 missing, according to the latest official figures.

Since the beginning of the year, flooding has left 1,260 dead or missing.

Until now, torrential rains have mostly hit China's south, swelling the Yangtze River -- the nation's longest waterway -- and some of its tributaries to dangerous levels.

Engineers at the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze have already copied with two flood crests, but both passed largely without incident as the dam's massive spillgates released torrents of water.

But authorities are now worried about Wuhan, capital of the central province of Hubei located downstream from the dam, where the flood peaks from the Yangtze and its tributary the Han River are set to converge.

Thousands of soldiers and emergency workers are laying down sand bags along the rivers in the nine-million-strong city, which is a major transport and economic hub, Xinhua said in a separate report.

In the nearby city of Xiatao, workers are on standby to open flood gates and divert water from the Han River to a walled low-lying area covering 450 square kilometres (180 square miles).



Soldiers help to evacuate residents from the town of Kouqian in China's Jilin province yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



A Russian couple dressed as Father Frost and a snow princess stand in a fountain in central Saint Petersburg yesterday to take people's minds off the summer heat and remind them of the coming winter.

PHOTO: AFP

Moscow wheezes as smog cloud blankets city

AFP, Moscow

Muscovites yesterday coughed their way through the hottest days of weather on record in the Russian capital as a smog cloud created by peat fires blanketed the city -- for a third day in a row.

The smog cloud -- which has left the spires of the Kremlin and onion domes of churches shrouded behind a misty curtain -- has been sparked by dozens of peat fires burning in the countryside around the city.

Irina Andrianova, spokeswoman for the emergency ministry, said there were some 43 peat fires burning in the Moscow region and the authorities were hoping to extinguish most of them by the end of the day.

"But unfortunately, due to the extreme weather conditions they will appear again," she told reporters.

Alexei Popikov of Moscow ecology monitoring watchdog Mosek monitoring told the Interfax news agency that the concentration of harmful particles in the air in Moscow was three times higher than the norm and in some cases 10 times.

The emergency ministry has employed an array of water-carrying aircraft to douse the fires, including two giant Ilyushin-76 planes, which have dropped a total of 516 tonnes of water.

The temperature on Monday hit 37.2 degrees Celsius (99 degrees Fahrenheit) beating Moscow's previous record temperature of 36.8 degrees from July 1920, the Moscow Weather Office said.

The weather yesterday was almost as uncomfortable, with the temperature nudging 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit).

Japan wants US Marines to move to Guam

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's government said yesterday it had no plan to delay transferring some 8,000 US marines based on the southern island of Okinawa to the US Pacific territory of Guam by 2014.

In Washington on Tuesday, Jackalynne Pfannenstiel, an assistant US secretary of the Navy, told Congress that the lack of infrastructure in Guam could cause delays.

But Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshito Sengoku told a news conference: "I have not confirmed that debate. We think we want to go ahead firmly as promised."

According to Saturday's Daily Yomiuri, the US Navy told the Guam government last week that the island's infrastructure could not handle a fast enough construction schedule to allow for the Marines to transfer there by 2014.

The US government has effectively given up on its target of completing the transfer in 2014 and also informed Tokyo of the delay, the daily said without giving a source.

The transfer plan, also involving the relocation of some 9,000 military family members, is part of a 2006 agreement between Tokyo and Washington aimed at reducing the heavy US military presence on Okinawa.

Deadly blast hits Afghan bus, kills 25

AFP, Herat

A roadside bomb ripped through a crowded Afghan bus yesterday, killing up to 25 civilians in a southwestern province on the Iranian border in one of the deadliest such attacks in months. The bomb exploded as the bus travelled on a highway through Nimroz province, provincial governor Ghulam Dastgir Azad and the interior ministry said.

Afghan officials blamed the attack on the Taliban, which is fighting to overthrow the Afghan government and evict nearly 150,000 foreign troops in a nine-year insurgency. The militant group denied involvement.

Azad said more than 20 civilians were killed in the blast. The interior ministry in Kabul put the death toll at 25, with more than 20 others injured. "The bomb was planted by the enemies because this morning a coalition convoy was supposed to cross the area," Azad said, referring to NATO forces.

"Coalition forces helped us to evacuate the injured."

Afghan civilians are bearing the brunt of the war, suffering death and injury in crossfire, suicide attacks and from roadside bombs or improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which kill and maim indiscriminately.

Zabihullah Mujahed, a Taliban spokesman, called AFP from an unknown location to deny that the militant group was behind the bombing. Taliban are known for denying attacks involving civilian casualties and for rampant propaganda.

"We are not responsible for this bombing. This is the work of the Nato. They've done this in a bid to divert attentions from Sangin incident," Mujahed told AFP, referring to a rocket attack that killed 52 civilians last Friday.

Afghan authorities and Nato-led troops are investigating the incident in Helmand province's Sangin district. Nato have denied involvement in the strike.

Surveys show that most civilian casualties in the war are caused by Taliban attacks. Roadside bombs are the militants' main weapon.

A Nato spokesman said civilian casualties caused by coalition's operations had fallen by nearly 11 percent in recent months while the number of non-combatants killed in militant attacks had increased by nearly 40 percent.

The force was doing "all we can" to protect civilians, German Brigadier General Josef Blotz, spokesman for Nato's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), told reporters.

President Hamid Karzai issued a statement "strongly" condemning the bombing.

Thousands of Pentagon files leaked earlier this week indicated that civilian deaths have been covered up and that Iran is funding the Taliban eight years after the 2001 US-led invasion ousted the radical Islamist regime from power.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denied those charges in an interview, telling CBS television: "We do not support any group" but calling the US-led invasion the "root cause" of the violence in Afghanistan.

Many Afghan people also blame the violence on the presence of the foreign troops.

US and Nato deployment is set to peak next month, as an extra 30,000 troops ordered into Afghanistan by President Barack Obama have mostly arrived in a bid to speed the end of the war.

Most of the troops have been sent to the volatile Taliban heartland in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, though the US is also beefing up other regions as the influence of the insurgency spreads.

A report by the US National Bureau of Economic Research this month analysed data on military clashes and incidents in which more than 4,000 civilian casualties in a 15-month period.

Kim Jong-Il transfers fund to son

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's ailing leader Kim Jong-Il is transferring his secret personal wealth to his youngest son and likely successor, a Seoul-based radio station said yesterday.

The transfer of money has been managed by Ri Chol, who stepped down in April as the communist country's ambassador to Switzerland, said Open Radio for North Korea, which specialises in North Korean news.

Ri has been considered one of Kim's closest aides and looks after his secret funds abroad, it said. The US-based Radio Free Asia carried a similar report about the transfer of money.

Analysts say Kim's personal funds have been dwindling because of economic difficulties and tightened international sanctions on the reclusive communist state.

There have been widespread reports that Kim Jong-Un, 27, is being groomed to take over from his 68-year-old father, who suffered a stroke in August 2008.

Some analysts say the North is likely to designate Kim Jong-Un as the leader's political heir when it convenes a rare meeting of key communist party delegates in September.

South Korea's spy chief Won Sei-Hoon said last month that Kim Jong-Il's poor health was driving him to speed up preparations to transfer power to his son, who has been taking a greater role in policy-making.

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Catalonia bans bullfighting

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Spain's northeastern Catalonia region has become the country's first mainland region to ban bullfighting after a heated parliamentary debate.

Cheers broke out in the local 135-seat legislature yesterday after the speaker announced the ban had passed by a vote 68 to 55 with nine abstentions.

The vote came after animal rights activists under a platform called "Prou!", which means "Enough", collected 180,000 signatures in a petition calling for a ban.

Politicians also argued during the parliamentary debate that bullfighting was seeing declining popularity in the region, with fewer and fewer people attending events.

"There are some traditions that can't remain frozen in time as society changes," Jose Rull, member of parliament for the Catalan Nationalist Party, Ciu, said.

"We don't have to ban everything, but the most degrading things should be banned."

The ban of the centuries-old tradition will take effect in 2012, closing Barcelona's last bullring, La Monumental.

Tim Friend, Al Jazeera's correspondent in Barcelona, said the vote was a sign of the growing gulf between the Catalan region and the rest of the nation.

"The divide between some of the regions in Spain and Madrid, the capital, has been increasing in recent years, and this is an example," he said.

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