

Afghan war kills 1,325 civilians this year

AFP, Kabul

More than 1,300 civilians have been killed in Afghanistan so far this year, mostly by Taliban insurgents, a leading Afghan rights group said yesterday.

Taliban militants were responsible for about 68 percent of the 1,325 deaths while Afghan and Nato troops were to blame for 23 percent, Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission said.

Violent but "unknown factors" killed the rest, it said.

The new toll shows a five percent increase over the same period last year, the group said, citing a nationwide count of civilian casualties by its regional offices, senior commissioner Nader Nadery told reporters.

Most of the casualties caused by the insurgents were killed by improvised explosive devices, the Taliban's weapon of choice which is also responsible for most military deaths in Afghanistan.

Nadery said fewer people had died in Nato-led airstrikes but more had been killed in rocket attacks by insurgents, but he did not give figures.



PHOTO: AFP Afghan policemen walk at the site of a suicide attack yesterday after a suicide attacker struck a police convoy in the Afghan city of Herat killing four policemen.

Courts in disarray as Maldivian crisis deepens

AFP, Colombo

The attorney general of the Maldives quit yesterday as the country's political crisis deepened with the president and the opposition-controlled parliament wrangling over a new Supreme Court.

Husnu Sood, a close associate of President Mohamed Nasheed, stepped down after accusing the parliament of undermining the constitution in the Indian Ocean archipelago nation.

In a televised address, Sood accused the parliament of blocking the establishment of a new Supreme Court by Sunday as required by the 2008 constitution.

"He blamed the parliament for undermining the constitution and not allowing the judicial system to work properly," an official close to Sood told AFP by telephone. "He resigned protesting against the attitude of the parliament."

President Nasheed appointed a panel to carry out the administrative work of the Supreme Court from Sunday after the two-year term of the court expired Saturday without parliament's approving a replacement.

"We are waiting for the Majlis (parliament) to pass an act that establishes a permanent Supreme Court," Nasheed's press secretary Mohamed Zuhair said in a statement.

Nasheed is at loggerheads with the parliament controlled by the People's Party, or the DRP, of former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Attempts at political reconciliation between them have failed, leading to the latest crisis.

Nasheed's cabinet resigned en masse on June 29 saying parliament was blocking their work. The cabinet has since been restored, but parliament is yet to ratify the new appointments.

The luxury holiday paradise of the Maldives embraced Western-style multi-party democracy in 2008 amid high hopes for reforms, but the clash between the executive and the legislature has crippled the administration.

INDIAN FLOOD Search for missing in Ladakh

AFP, Leh

Emergency teams in India's remote Himalayan region of Ladakh on Sunday struggled to deliver food and aid to survivors of flash floods that killed at least 137 people and left 500 missing.

A cloudburst on Friday caused devastating flooding that swept away roads, buildings, bridges and power cables in a tide of rock and mud. Rescuers fear many more victims may have died after being buried.

Thousands of residents in Leh, the main town of Ladakh in the Indian-controlled sector of Kashmir, abandoned houses hit by the mud flows and moved to higher ground where they slept in the open despite the cold.

Indian soldiers, police and paramilitary troops led the relief operation on Sunday, sifting through destroyed homes and providing basic medical care to those injured.

Tourists visiting the region and local Buddhist monks also helped in the clearance and rescue work, which was hampered by a lack of heavy-lifting equipment and the severe mountain terrain.

"We now have 137 confirmed deaths and over 400 injured," a police officer in Leh told AFP, asking not to be named as he was not authorised to talk to the media.

Curfew lifted in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Shops and businesses opened in Indian Kashmir yesterday for the first time in two weeks after violent protests and curfews that brought the region to a standstill.

The Muslim-majority Kashmir valley has been rocked by unrest since a teenage student was killed by a police tear-gas shell on June 11.

Since then, 49 people have been killed as the security forces regularly opened fire to control angry separatist demonstrations triggered by each civilian death.

Some 32 people -- many of them young men or teenagers -- have died in the last nine days.

Many banks, private schools and shops were open on Sunday in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian-ruled Kashmir, despite the day being an official holiday.

Anger as Zardari addresses UK rally

AFP, Birmingham

Hundreds of protestors gathered to criticise President Asif Ali Zardari at a rally for British Pakistanis Saturday while millions struggled in the aftermath of floods back home.

Zardari defended his trip to Britain despite Pakistan's worst-ever floods at an event for some 3,000 people in Birmingham, central England, including Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) members and leading figures in the British Pakistani community.

Hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside the venue, some holding placards reading "1000s dying, president is holidaying" and "Are the Zardaris enjoying England while Pakistan drowns?"

And police said one man was escorted from the hall after a shoe was thrown at Zardari, while adding it did not land close to him. It has not yet been decided whether to press charges, a spokeswoman for the local force said.

Although journalists were barred from the event, a PPP spokesman told AFP afterwards that Zardari had defended his handling of the flooding and asked attendees to donate to the appeal to help victims.

"He was saying that the prime minister is the chief executive because he's got all the powers, the Senate was in session, all the chief ministers were there, he was in touch with them over the phone," said Waheed Rasab, the PPP's coordinator for Britain.

Pak PM calls for help as fresh rains hamper flood aid

AFP, Tori Band

Fresh rains lashed flood-hit Sindh province, calling again for international aid as he said the disaster had spiralled beyond the government's capacity.

"Millions of people have suffered and still there is more rain and further losses are feared. I appeal to the world to help us, we are doing what we can," Gilani told reporters, as he urged those threatened by the "unprecedented" floods to move to safer spots.

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani visited flood-hit areas of Sindh province, calling again for international aid as he said the disaster had spiralled beyond the government's capacity.

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**Pakistan floods**

Heavy rains worsen disaster in its second week

**Flood toll**

- ▶ At least 1,600 killed: UN
- ▶ Up to 15 million affected
- ▶ More than 250,000 homes damaged
- ▶ 1.38 million acres of crop land damaged
- ▶ Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani appeals for immediate international help

Sources: Gov't/RedCross/UN/WHO



PHOTO: AFP US First Lady Michelle Obama (R) and her daughter Sasha arrive at the Spain's King's palace in Palma de Mallorca yesterday. They will have lunch with King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia before heading back to the USA.

Elena Kagan sworn in as US SC Justice

BBC ONLINE

Elena Kagan has been sworn in as the newest justice in the US Supreme Court.

She is President Barack Obama's second appointment to the US's most powerful court and only the fourth woman to serve on the nine-member panel.

The 50-year-old becomes the youngest serving Supreme Court judge. She will serve alongside President Obama's first appointment, Sonia Sotomayor.

She is thought unlikely to alter the balance of the court as she replaces liberal justice John Paul Stevens.

Ms Kagan swore to "faithfully and impartially" uphold the law for all Americans.

She will formally join the court on 1 October, just before the judges return to the bench for a new session after their summer recess.

North Korea seizes South's fishing boat

BBC ONLINE

A South Korean fishing boat missing in the Sea of Japan has been detained by the North, coastguard officials say.

The officials said the crew of the Daeseung was being investigated by North Korean authorities.

Tension remains high between the Koreans amid a naval exercise carried out by the South in the Yellow Sea.

The exercises were a show of force after the North was blamed for sinking a Southern warship in March.

Authorities in the boat's home South Korean port of Pohang said the Daeseung had stopped sending signals after a fishing trip in the Sea of Japan, known in Korea as the East Sea, on Saturday.

The South Korean coastguard said in a statement: "We have found out that our fishing vessel is being investigated by North Korean officials in the presumed North Korea exclusive economic waters in the northern East Sea."

"The South Korean government, according to international law, wants the swift resolution to the matter and the safe return of its vessel and its fisherman."

The vessel has four South Koreans and three Chinese on board.

Media reports in the South say the Daeseung is being towed to the Northern port of Songjin.

North Korea media has so far made no comment on the latest reports.

There have been frequent incidents in recent years involving fishing boats of both sides in the disputed waters.

New PM appointed in S Korea reshuffle

BBC ONLINE

South Korea's President, Lee Myung-bak, has replaced the prime minister and seven ministers in the biggest cabinet reshuffle since he took office in 2008.

His nominee to be prime minister, Kim Tae-ho, was once a provincial governor.

Chung Un-chan stepped down as prime minister after parliament rejected the government's plans for a new city.

The reshuffle also comes less than two weeks after Lee's Grand National Party won parliamentary by-elections seen as a referendum on the president.

In June, the ruling party suffered a major defeat in local elections.

Series of explosions rock Iraq; 43 dead

BBC ONLINE

The death toll from a series of explosions in the southern Iraqi city of Basra on Saturday has risen to 43, officials have said.

One blast was initially reported to have been caused by an exploding generator, but officials now say it was a roadside bomb.

Two car bombs were also used in the co-ordinated attack, they said.

In a separate incident yesterday, a suicide bomb blast killed six people in the city of Ramadi east of the Baghdad.

The car bomb was detonated at a petrol station near a post office where people were queuing to receive social welfare payments, reports said.

In Basra, 185 people were confirmed to have been wounded in the attack, hospital officials told reporters.

Families of the dead have not been able to identify their relatives' bodies because many are too badly burned, the news agency Reuters reported.

The bomb, believed to have been placed under an electricity generator, sparked a fire, which swept through the al-Ashaar market in the city 50km (340 miles) from Baghdad.

"The attack that hit Basra yesterday evening was the result of terrorist action," Basra security chief Ali al-Maliki was quoted as saying.

Basra, the main city in the largely Shia Muslim south of Iraq, has been comparatively free of insurgent violence this year.

Ramadi is the provincial capital of Anbar, a stronghold for Sunni insurgents.

Castro addresses parliament after four-year

BBC ONLINE

Fidel Castro, the former Cuban leader, has delivered his first speech to the national assembly since resigning over ill health four years ago.

The chamber erupted into applause at the sight of Castro, drenched in his familiar olive-green fatigues but without his commandant's insignia.

In an uncharacteristically short speech of just over 10 minutes, he urged the US not to allow a war with Iran.

His brother Raul, who succeeded him as president, sat at his side as he spoke.

It was the first time the two had appeared together in public since Fidel Castro stepped down in 2006.

The speech was a solid, polished performance, Castro's voice stronger than at any point since he re-emerged into public life, the BBC's Michael Voss reports from Havana.

'NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST'

Castro arrived in the chamber on the arm of a subordinate, waving and smiling as the crowd applauded loudly in unison.

In the past, his speeches ran to hours.

After Saturday's address, he sat on for about an hour and 10 minutes, listening to questions from deputies on foreign affairs and responding to them.

The former president warned of the risk of a "nuclear holocaust" involving the US and Iran.

He accused the US of planning to attack Iran and North Korea and urged President Barack Obama to prevent such a conflict happening.



An activist with her child stands in front of a portrait of Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi during a rally in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Activists gathered to mark the 22nd anniversary of the failed bloody uprising against the ruling junta in 1988. On August 8, 1988, a student-led uprising against Myanmar's military rulers was launched but it was crushed that September by the army, killing more than 3,000 people.

PHOTO: AFP