

Nato troops, Afghans killed in attacks

AFP, Kandahar

Three Nato soldiers, at least a dozen Afghan security guards and several civilians were killed in a wave of violence across Afghanistan, authorities said yesterday.

Two of the soldiers were killed in a bomb attack in southern Afghanistan on Friday and a third -- an American -- died in a similar attack on Thursday, the military announced.

The nationalities of Friday's casualties were not disclosed but a Nato spokesman denied that they were Americans.

Nato's mission in Afghanistan does not disclose the nationalities of its casualties, leaving it for the countries involved to do so.

The deaths bring to 441 the number of foreign soldiers killed in the Afghan war so far this year. The total for 2009 was 520, according to an AFP count based on a tally kept by casualties.org.

The force said it killed a woman during an operation on Thursday aimed at capturing a Taliban commander in the eastern province of Khost.

Australians go to the polls

AFP, Sydney

From the dusty Outback to beachside booths and frozen Antarctic polling stations, millions of Australians will vote today in an election costing some 90 million US dollars and employing 70,000 staff.

Some 14,088,260 registered voters were expected to file through schools, churches, surf life-saving clubs and community centres temporarily converted into voting stations after polls open at 8:00am (2200 GMT yesterday).

Voting is compulsory in the vast island continent, making a national election a logistical operation requiring some 7,700 polling places, 43 million ballot papers and at least 100,000 pencils.

Thousands have already cast their vote for the centre-left Labor Party of Prime Minister Julia Gillard or her right-leaning Liberal Party opponent Tony Abbott -- including soldiers serving in Afghanistan and East Timor.

The leaders spent their final campaign week attempting to shore up support in the marginal seats of Sydney and Queensland, but Australia House in London is again expected to be the polling station where the most votes are cast.

"It took 16,000 votes at the last election and Hong Kong took 10,000 out of about 70,000 votes issued across all overseas diplomatic missions," Australian Electoral Commission spokesman Phil Diak said.

In Australia's enormous Outback, officials have travelled over some 1.2 billion square kilometres (463,000 square miles) by aircraft and four-wheel drive to reach remote



L-R: Tony Abbott, opposition Liberal Party leader, and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Aboriginal communities, cattle stations and mines.

These votes, collected in the two weeks before the August 21 poll, come from some 400 isolated and far-flung places including the fringes of the Kakadu National Park while thousands more from remote spots have sent postal

votes. Residents of the tiny South Australian desert town of Innamincka have already voted, sending their choices in by post with the weekly mail plane rather than trek 226 kilometres (140 miles) to the nearest booth.

"If we didn't have postal vote, there would be no voting," Michelle Hoffman, manager of the Innamincka Hotel told AFP.

Electoral officials make special provisions for scientists and other Australians working in Antarctica, with Tasmania's operations manager Greg Richardson ensuring the 49 citizens working in the cold conditions can vote.

Voting papers -- which can stretch to almost a metre (yard) long in some states -- are emailed to a nominated returning officer and then printed out in pieces and taped or stapled together to match the printed forms.

"Obviously, printing the New South Wales ballot paper -- I think it's got 84 candidates on it -- it's a fairly big sucker," Richardson said.

The returning officer then collects the papers and reads the results out to an official in Australia the day after the election -- and must also report any other mark or comment on the paper.

The official transcribes the votes onto a voting paper and is also tasked with replicating any other words written on the paper -- even if an obscenity is noted.

"It is supposed to be a representation of what they've done. People feel the need to do that occasionally," Richardson said. Despite the logistical difficulties, Australians overwhelmingly turn out to vote, with turnout reaching 94.76 per cent of those enrolled in the November 2007 election in which Labor's Kevin Rudd ended 11 years of Liberal Party rule.

Those who fail to vote are fined 20 dollars (17.80 US).

Thai grants extradition of 'Merchant of Death'

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai court yesterday ordered the extradition of an alleged Russian arms dealer dubbed the "Merchant of Death" to the United States on terrorism charges, prompting an angry response from Moscow.

Viktor Bout, said to have inspired the Hollywood film "Lord of War" starring Nicolas Cage, has been fighting extradition since his March 2008 arrest in a Bangkok sting operation by US agents posing as Colombian rebels.

He faces a maximum sentence of life in prison if convicted in the United States on charges including conspiracy to kill US nationals and to provide material support or resources to a foreign terrorist organisation.

His young daughter broke down in tears after a Bangkok appeals court delivered its ruling, which his wife, Alla, later said was "unfair" and made under political pressure from the United States.

"The court has decided to detain him for extradition to the US," judge Jitakorn Patanasiri said, overturning a 2009 decision by a lower court.

70 years on from WWII, Britain remembers 'the few'

AP, London

In the words of Winston Churchill, it was Britain's "finest hour," a turning point in world history though it didn't always feel that way at the time.

Seventy years after the Battle of Britain, Churchill's daughter was commemorating the pivotal air campaign Friday alongside surviving members of "the few," the Royal Air Force pilots who defied the odds to defend the country from German attack.

One of them is Nigel Rose, now a 92-year-old retired quantity surveyor, then a newly trained Spitfire pilot battling German bombers over England's south coast.

"I don't think one realized that this scrap that we were having would have a startling effect on the progress of events, and possibly help stop the impending invasion," Rose said.

Between July and October 1940, RAF fighter squadrons fought Luftwaffe bombers that pounded Britain's cities and airfields as preparation for a planned invasion.

Of 2,900 British and Allied airmen who took part, more than 500 were killed. But Germany's failure to defeat the young, undertrained and outnumbered RAF crews and conquer Britain's skies helped save the country from Nazi occupation.

Friday marks the 70th anniversary of Churchill's rousing House of Commons speech of Aug. 20, 1940, in which the prime minister said of the air crews that "never in the field of human



Winston Churchill: "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed, by so many, to so few"

conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

Actor Robert Hardy was due to read the speech Friday at a ceremony attended by Churchill's daughter Lady Mary Soames, wartime singer Vera Lynn and some of the dwindling band of Battle of Britain veterans now only about 100 strong. The ceremony was being followed by a fly over of World War II Spitfire and Hurricane fighters.

The "few" speech was one of several stirring addresses by Churchill that helped galvanize British resolve in the darkest days of the war. In May 1940, he vowed to fight the Nazis with "blood, toil, tears and sweat."

After France fell to German invaders the next month, Churchill told lawmakers that "the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin" and urged his country to fight so that "if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for 1,000 years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'"

Phil Reed, director of the Churchill War Rooms, said the August speech epitomized Churchill's "ability to capture in the most stirring way the spirit of a nation fighting for its existence."

"Now part of the general folklore of the battle, the speech is today considered a defining moment of the conflict and one of Churchill's most emotive and stirring pronouncements."

"The few" are even fewer now men in their 90s, for whom those days are still vivid. Then, many were barely out of their teens, rushed into battle without full training. Rose had never even seen a German plane before when he was sent into combat in the summer of 1940.

"When we suddenly saw 100 or more at once silhouetted against a white cloud it was pretty impressive," Rose said.

"We arrived on a day when there had been a hell of a battle going on. We were relieving Hurricanes and there was one upside down in the middle of the air field."

Over the next few months, Rose and his comrades were scrambled again and again to fight off waves of German bombers. Rose was wounded in September 1940 but later returned to flying.

58 whales die in NZ beach stranding

AP, WELLINGTON, New Zealand

New Zealand whale rescue volunteers were racing against time yesterday to save 15 pilot whales stranded on an isolated northern beach -- after rescuers reported 58 of the pod had already died.

Kimberly Muncaster, chief executive of the Project Jonah whale aid group, said the 15 surviving whales were in "fairly poor condition."

The whales probably stranded during the night, which is why so many died before they were discovered, said Carolyn Smith, the community relations program manager for the Department of Conservation.

Far North Whale Rescue, a team of trained volunteers, was working with the department to try to refloat the survivors, she said.

At least five people were working to assist each stranded mammal, which weigh up to 3,300 pounds (1,500 kilograms) each.

Heavy rain and wind in the area near the North Island town of Kaitiata was both a help and a hindrance, Smith said. The whales would not dry out on the beach, but it made conditions difficult for rescuers.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq claims army recruit bombing

AP, Baghdad

An al-Qaida in Iraq front group yesterday claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing this week that killed 61 Iraqi army recruits in the deadliest single act of violence in Baghdad in months.

The Islamic State of Iraq, which includes al-Qaeda in Iraq and other allied Sunni insurgent factions, boasted that its operative easily passed through checkpoints before detonating his explosives belt in a crowd of officers and recruits outside army headquarters Tuesday.

The bomber was able to "break all barriers" and strike "Shiite infidels and other apostates who were selling their religion," the group said in a statement posted on a militant website.

The Iraqi army's recruitment drive aimed to hire soldiers from the country's poorest Shiite areas. The Islamic State of Iraq is a Sunni extremist group that considers Shiites heretics.

The bombing, which also wounded at least 125 people, once again raised concerns about the Iraqi security forces' readiness to protect their country at a time when all but 50,000 U.S. troops are heading home.

A senior adviser to Iraq's top Shiite cleric blasted the country's police and military leadership Friday for failing to protect military recruits despite repeated attacks on them in the past.

"Several attacks have occurred against gatherings of recruits, yet security forces failed to take precautionary measures to protect them," said Sheikh Abdul-Mahdi al-Karbalai during Friday's sermon in the holy city of Karbala.

Al-Karbalai is a top representative of the revered cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, whose views carry great weight with Iraq's Shiite majority. Al-Karbalai called on the government to take "firm action" against those responsible for the security breach.

Suspected Sunni militants have frequently targeted Iraq's policemen and soldiers looking to expose the inability of the Shiite-dominated government to protect the country, particularly in light of the looming departure of the U.S. military.

The US plans to withdraw all combat forces by Aug. 31, leaving only 50,000 troops to help train Iraqi security forces. As of yesterday, there were an estimated 52,000 US soldiers were still in Iraq.

Hendrix's London flat to open to public

REUTERS, London

Jimi Hendrix's central London home will open to the public next week to commemorate the 40th anniversary of his death.

For 12 days only, Hendrix fans can tour the Mayfair flat where he wrote, played and entertained.

The opening of the top-floor flat will be part of a wider "Hendrix in Britain" exhibition at the Handel House Museum, which includes a bright orange jacket and wide-brimmed hat worn by Hendrix in performance, and Hendrix's scrawled directions to the Isle of Wight Festival.

"We are delighted to be opening up the flat which was a true home base to Hendrix during his seemingly endless schedule of touring in the UK and elsewhere," said museum director Sarah Bardwell in a statement.

The rock star, who died in September 1970 at the age of 27, rented the property for 30 pounds (\$46) a week with his English girlfriend Kathy Etchingham.

No. 23 Brook Street, now one property with No. 25, was previously occupied by composer George Handel, who wrote the Messiah whilst living there.

US discusses Iran sanctions with Turkey

REUTERS, Ankara/Istanbul

US officials have held talks with Turkey over US sanctions on Iran, US and Turkish officials said, a possible sign that Washington may be growing impatient with Ankara's trade with Iran despite sanctions.

The meeting this week, which included talks between US State and Treasury officials and the Turkish government, came as Turkey said it would support Turkish companies making sales to Tehran despite unilateral US sanctions that restrict trade.

"They were here to discuss and explain UN sanctions and also the new US sanctions package signed into legislation by President Obama on July 1," a US embassy official in Ankara told Reuters.

The official said Turkey was one of many countries the delegation was planning to visit.

"There was an exchange of views about US sanctions on Iran," a Turkish Foreign Ministry source told Reuters.

"We told them Turkey does not feel itself bound to adhere to any sanctions other than those enacted by the UN"

Since June, the UN Security Council, the United States and the European Union have tightened sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program, which Washington fears is a cover to build an atomic bomb. Tehran says its aims are purely peaceful.

Both the US and EU sanctions cover a broader range of activities than those enacted by the UN and are aimed at squeezing Iran's energy and banking sectors, which could also hurt companies from other countries doing business with Tehran.

The US legislation will sanction companies for supplying Iran with refined petroleum products with a fair market value exceeding \$1 million or that during a 12-month period have an aggregate fair market value of \$5 million or more.

The Cumhuriyet daily, quoting an unnamed US official, said Washington had sent the delegation to warn Turkey it intended to target Turkish companies deemed to be trading with the Islamic Republic in violation of US sanctions.

Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz told Reuters this month Ankara would back private firms making sales to Iran.

Turkey stepped in to sell Iran the equivalent of 1.2 million barrels of gasoline in June when most other sellers refused to continue sales due to the looming sanctions.

But Turkey charged Iran a 25 percent premium above the market rate then sharply curtailed gasoline shipments by the 73 percent in July as the US sanctions came into force.

Cyprus will not allow Gaza-bound aid ship

REUTERS, Nicosia

Cyprus will not allow a ship carrying women activists and aid for the blockaded Palestinian territory of Gaza to sail from its ports, the island's police said yesterday.

Women activists said they planned to take aid to Gaza next week and their vessel, the Mariam, would set sail from Lebanon for Cyprus Sunday.

Israel has said it will not allow ships to reach Gaza, controlled by the militant Palestinian group Hamas since 2007. Nine pro-Palestinian Turks were killed on May 31 when Israeli commandos boarded a flotilla of aid vessels heading for Gaza.

"Our position is clear. The arrival and departure of vessels to or from Gaza via Cyprus ports is prohibited and we will implement that decision," Cypriot police spokesman Michalis Katsounotos told Reuters.

Cyprus was used as a launch pad for activists to reach Gaza by sea from 2008 until mid-2009. Authorities introduced a ban last year, citing the island's national interests.

Yasser Qashlaq, an organizer of the Mariam expedition, was undeterred, saying the vessel would still leave Lebanon's northern port of Tripoli Sunday evening.

Qashlaq said Cyprus had no right to stop ships sailing to Gaza and would need to explain any ban in writing.

Israeli and Palestinian heads await direct talks invitation

BBC ONLINE

Israeli and Palestinian officials are awaiting statements from Washington and the Middle East Quartet inviting them to direct talks, the BBC has learned.

US media reports say negotiations could begin as early as September, after months of indirect negotiations.

Israeli and Palestinian leaders have reportedly agreed in principle to a one-year time limit on the talks.

But prospects of a comprehensive deal are slim as serious disagreements exist on core issues, correspondents say.

Sensitive areas - including the construction of illegal Jewish settlements and whether a future Palestinian state should be based on the 1967 ceasefire lines - will be difficult to overcome, says the BBC's Wyre Davies in Jerusalem.

BASIS FOR TALKS Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator, told the BBC that he was expecting a statement from the International Quartet - the US, EU, Russia and the UN - later on Friday that would outline the basis for direct peace talks.

A subsequent statement from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would invite Israeli and Palestinian leaders to begin talks in Washington on 2 September, although final details were still being worked out, the New York Times and the Reuters news agency reported.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas have agreed to place a one-year time limit on the talks, The Times said, citing two unnamed officials.

Mr Abbas broke off talks with the previous Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, in late 2008 and contacts were frozen following Israel's offensive against the militant Hamas movement in the Gaza Strip in December that year.

After a 19-month deadlock, indirect contacts resumed in May in the form of "proximity talks", which saw US Middle East envoy George Mitchell shuttle back and forth between the two sides.

Mr Netanyahu has insisted for many weeks that he is ready to come to the negotiating table, but without preconditions.

But Mr Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, wants guarantees that a future Palestinian state would be based on the 1967 borders and that all illegal construction in Jewish settlements would halt before he sits down with the Israelis.



An Israeli soldier detains a protestor during a demonstration against pictures of troops posing with handcuffed Palestinian prisoners posted on Facebook, yesterday in the West Bank village of Bilin.