

Pakistan joins Nato probe into border attack

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistan has sent a team to Afghanistan to probe a cross-border Nato attack that allegedly killed three Pakistani soldiers, forcing a key border crossing to close, officials said yesterday.

Pakistan has blocked the main land route for Nato convoys carrying supplies to neighbouring Afghanistan since the helicopter attack on Thursday, which Nato claimed was in self-defence but was condemned by Islamabad.

A two-member Pakistan team led by Brigadier Usman Khattak, deputy inspector general of the Frontier Corps, travelled to Afghanistan on Saturday to join an investigation into the incident by the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) and US officials, an official told AFP by telephone.

Nato said aircraft had entered Pakistani airspace in self-defence and killed "several armed individuals" after the crews believed they had been fired at from the ground in the northwest tribal area of Kurram.

It was the fourth such strike in a week by Nato helicopters pursuing militants into Pakistan, which the military claimed killed three of its men and officials condemned as a breach of Pakistan's sovereignty.

Brigadier Khattak had already visited the site of the attack and held talks with troops deployed in the area, the official said, requesting anonymity.

The border in Pakistan's northwest, that routes Nato supplies through the Khyber pass at Torkham, remained closed for a fourth day on Sunday.

"We will review the position when the security situation is normalised," the official said, adding that efforts were continuing to resolve the problem through negotiations.



An Afghan woman waits to receive food donations from Turkish soldiers with the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) in Kabul yesterday. Regional Command Capital (RCC) distributed food packs to needy families who have lost loved ones in the war. PHOTO: AFP

Pak blockade disrupts Nato supplies for fourth day

THE INDIAN EXPRESS ONLINE

Pakistan's blockade of a key land route to Afghanistan disrupted crucial Nato fuel supplies for a fourth consecutive day yesterday, leaving scores of trucks and tankers stranded at the frontier.

Pakistan blocked the main land route for fuel and logistic supplies for US-led forces in Afghanistan after three Pakistani soldiers were killed in a Nato air strike this week.

Supplies to Nato and foreign troops in Afghanistan via the Torkhum border post in northwest Pakistan continued to be suspended, and long queues of trucks and tankers were seen at the frontier.

Around 24 oil tankers and 126 containers were waiting at the Torkhum post in Khyber tribal region, said Assistant Political Agent, Azam Jan Khalil.

Nato convoys that could not reach Torkhum have stopped in different areas near Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa capital Peshawar.

CHHATTISGARH BY-POLLS BJP, Congress claim victory ahead of result

IANS, Raipur

Chhattisgarh's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the opposition Congress yesterday claimed victory in a crucial assembly-by-poll, a day before the results are announced.

"The voter turnout was higher this time. This means the BJP will deliver another humiliating defeat to the Congress," BJP election in-charge for the Bhatgaon seat and senior state minister Brijmohan Agrawal said.

The Congress said the results will expose all the claims and calculations of the BJP.

"Let them think what they want, the result will be stunning for BJP. A high voter turnout has always produced result against the incumbent party," Congress Chhattisgarh unit president Dhanendra Sahu said.

The Congress has 39 members in the state assembly and it needs to wrest the seat from the BJP to narrow the margin with the ruling party as a by-election for one more seat - Balod in Durg district - is set to be held soon following death of the BJP's sitting legislator Madanlal Sahu in August.

The BJP comfortably won the Bhatgaon seat in the last assembly polls in November 2008 and the Congress candidate even lost his deposit when the polling percentage was nearly 72 percent, against 75 percent this time around. The party has 47 seats in a 90-member state assembly.

UK pays 1.5m dollars in compensation to Afghans

AFP, London

Britain has paid 1.5 million dollars to Afghans this year in compensation for deaths, injuries and damaged property, official figures showed yesterday.

British forces have agreed to pay 1,463,653.50 dollars to settle claims made between January and mid-August this year, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) said.

The money included 161,550 dollars paid to the families of at least 35 civilians killed by Nato operations in Afghanistan.

Claims relating to 17 further locals are still under investigation.

Most of the compensation was for damage to crops and dwellings.

"When compensation claims are received by the MoD they are considered on the basis of whether or not there is a legal liability to pay compensation," a ministry spokesman said.

"In some cases, where there is a major threat to the stabilisation effort and it is impossible to form a view on strict legal liability, ex-gratia payments may be made for personal loss, injury or death."

The largest payout was 32,000 dollars, which went to a family that saw two brothers and two sons killed in a missile strike in the Babaji district of the restive southern Helmand province in December 2009.

Afghanistan starts closing private security firms

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghanistan has begun disbanding private security companies operating in the country, shutting down eight firms and seizing over 400 weapons, the Interior Ministry said yesterday.

The move is part of President Hamid Karzai's ambitious plan to take over all Afghan security responsibilities from foreign troops by 2014.

Since Karzai's decree in August, a plan has been drawn up for the process which is expected to be complete by the end of the year, Interior Ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary said. The United Nations and Nato-led International Security Assistance force had given it their support, he added.

"The interior ministry is implementing this plan with seriousness and decisiveness," he told a regular briefing.

The first targets are illegal armed groups operating as private security firms, companies with temporary permits and those who provide security escorts for foreign forces and have been engaged in criminal acts and security breaches.

The government has already closed down an Afghan security firm with 75 employees, and several smaller groups, which provided security

escorts for convoys, Bashary said.

Firms are exempt whose guards work inside compounds used by foreign embassies and international businesses and aid and charitable organizations.

General David Petraeus, the top US and Nato commander in Afghanistan, said late last month that Karzai was also prepared to allow companies operating from some fixed sites, including power plants, to continue their work.

"The plan is arranged in a such a manner that it does not create a security gap, yet at the same time (we can) dismantle the private security companies," Bashary said.

Employees from the firms can join the Afghan security forces if they wish, he added.

Bashary said he did not have an estimate of the total number of firms, but there were 52 registered with the government, half of them foreign.

Kabul estimates that up to 40,000 Afghans are employed by these firms, seen as a parallel security operations outside government control. Their heavily armed guards forcing a route through traffic is a common sight on Afghan streets.

Musharraf calls Nawaz Sharif 'brainless'

THE INDIAN EXPRESS ONLINE

Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, who in 1999 overthrew the government of Nawaz Sharif, believes the two-time premier lacks intellect and is "totally brainless".

Musharraf, who launched his All Pakistan Muslim League in the UK and announced his return to active politics said Sharif lost power twice as he lacked intellect.

"Nawaz Sharif lost power twice because he lacked intellect," Musharraf, who also apologised to the people for the mistakes of his regime, told hundreds of supporters in Birmingham last evening.

"I worked with him for an entire year and noticed that Nawaz Sharif is totally brainless," Musharraf was quoted as saying by the News International.

Bin Laden softens tone, but to what end?

NEWS ANALYSIS

AP, Cairo

leader Osama bin Laden issued a humanitarian appeal on Saturday urging Muslim governments to do more to help Pakistan's flood victims and expressing worry about climate change. It was his second purported audiotape in as many days.

The less aggressive approach contrasted with al-Qaeda's previous calls for a violent response in what experts say could be a "good cop, bad cop" ploy to exploit anger over the flooding and rally support for the terror network.

al-Qaeda is under pressure to refurbish support among Pakistanis as it faces a surge in US missile strikes and government crackdowns on insurgents who easily move between Afghanistan and Pakistan's porous border. American officials have asserted for months that the core of the network has been weakened and is struggling to raise money and attract recruits.

Bin Laden, who is believed to be hiding in the lawless border area that separates the two countries, said governments of Muslim nations have not done enough to help Pakistanis hit by

devastating floods that killed hundreds and affected about 20 million people this summer.

"The effort should have been bigger from the beginning," he said in a recording posted Saturday on militant websites. It was distributed along with a photograph of a smiling bin Laden superimposed over pictures of flood victims.

He also singled out Arab leaders, accusing them of failing to respond to a calamity in a fellow Muslim nation and asserting that the UN secretary-general did more than them to help Pakistan.

Bin Laden has often sought to package himself as a senior statesman. In this recording, he assumed a tone more measured than past videos and recordings in which he and his deputies called for the leaders of Muslim nations like his native Saudi Arabia to be overthrown.

Experts said he was likely trying to broaden al-Qaeda's appeal beyond its traditional extremist support base while remaining devoted to the network's campaign of violence.

The messages coincided with reports that bin Laden was behind the terror plots to attack several European cities. If true, that would be the most operational role that bin Laden has played in plotting attacks since Sept 11, 2001.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel greets spectators during the central celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the German reunification yesterday in front of the town hall of the northern German city of Bremen. PHOTO: AFP

Germany marks 20 years of unity

AFP, Berlin

Germany yesterday celebrated the 20th anniversary of its reunification when the capitalist West and communist East merged after decades of Cold War division that ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Several hundred thousand people were expected in the northern city of Bremen, which is hosting the celebrations this year, for street parties and events led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was brought up in East Germany.

In a video podcast on the eve of the celebrations, Merkel paid tribute to East Germans for having "the courage to fight for freedom."

"At the same time, there was a huge wave of solidarity from the people in West Germany. It is thanks to these joint efforts that we have been able to rebuild so quickly and make Germany a country that is respected in the world."

Also expected to attend the reunification celebrations were European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and Nato Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

US President Barack Obama congratulated the country, praising "the courage and conviction of the German people that brought down the Berlin Wall, ending decades of painful and artificial separation."

The peaceful reunification of East and West Germany was a "historic achievement," he said.

The reunification treaty was signed on October 3, 1990, just under a year after the Berlin Wall was pulled down in a bloodless revolution, and brought the two halves of the country together amid joyful scenes.

In a recent poll, 84 percent of Germans said they believed national unification after four decades of division had been the right decision, despite a lingering economic gap between East and West.

Guatemala sex study revives painful memories in US

AFP, Washington

The scandal over Guatemalans infected with sex diseases in the 1940s so that US researchers could test remedies has revived painful memories of a similar episode involving African-Americans in the 20th century.

US President Barack Obama personally apologized on Friday to Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom and "all those affected," by the experiment conducted by US public health researchers on hundreds of people in Guatemala between 1946 and 1948, the White House said.

In 1997, then president Bill Clinton similarly apologized for a study on treating syphilis that involved 400 black men who were recruited by medical authorities but were denied any treatment so researchers could study the progression of the disease.

The study on seasonal farm workers in the southern city of Tuskegee, Alabama, often described as the "Tuskegee experiment," took place between 1932 and 1972. The two ordeals are linked together by

one man. The chief researcher in the Guatemala study, controversial US public health doctor John Cutler, also played a major role in the Tuskegee experiment.

In fact, the Guatemala experiments came to light this year after Wellesley College professor Susan Reverby stumbled upon archived documents outlining the experiment led by Cutler, who died in 2003.

The main difference between the two experiments is that the Tuskegee men came to the study already infected with syphilis, unlike the Guatemalans who were deliberately infected by US researchers.

However, the Tuskegee men in many cases did not know they had the disease, only what was referred to culturally in the area as "bad blood," a syndrome that caused fatigue and other symptoms.

In Guatemala, the researchers infected female commercial sex workers with gonorrhoea or syphilis, and then allowed them to have unprotected sex with soldiers or prison inmates. They tested penicillin on them as treatment so see how effective it was.

"What was done cannot be undone but we can end the silence," Clinton said in 1997.

"We can stop turning our heads away. We can look at you in the eyes and finally say, on behalf of the American people, what the United States government did was shameful and I am sorry."

The Tuskegee experiment has become a powerful symbol of racism in the medical domain, according to author James H. Jones who authored a 1991 book on the subject.

"Treatment was deliberately withheld from syphilitic men in an effort to determine the natural course of the disease, regardless of the human cost to the subjects, their wives and children or their communities," he said.

The study "was actually an ugly collaboration involving Public Health Service physicians, local private practitioners (white and black), the prestigious all-black Tuskegee Institute and Hospital, the county and state health departments, even draft boards," he said.

Nato's combat item stolen, sold to Pak insurgents

IANS, Islamabad

Combat materials, including sophisticated communication devices and heavy-duty generators, meant for Nato troops are stolen by transporters and sold to militants in Pakistan, a media report said yesterday.

A godown of stolen items of Nato forces, including combat material, was unearthed in Islamabad's rural area of Tarnol during a police raid Saturday night. Four people were arrested in the operation.

Pakistani newspaper Dawn said quoting police sources that the dealer of the stolen supplies of Nato sold the items to individuals and a large quantity of them were purchased by militants.

The Saturday raid was carried on the basis of a tip off from four people who were arrested Friday when another godown of Nato items were seized from the same locality.

The seized items include sophisticated equipments used during combat, communication systems, wireless sets, heavy-duty generators, mountain divers kits, stretchers, water bags, shoes and gloves.

Besides, vehicles such as four-wheel DG-5 and six-wheel DG-3 used as armed personnel carriers and accessories of helicopters were also seized during the raid.

Gene flaw causes small brain

AFP, Paris

Microcephaly, a disorder which leads to an abnormally small brain, has been traced in part to a flaw in a gene called WDR62 that plays a key role in the development of neurons, according to studies published yesterday by the journal Nature Genetics.

Microcephaly, signalled by a small head and receding forehead, can be extremely disabling, handicapping speech and motor functions. There is no cure.

The WDR62 abnormality is one of a range of suspected genetic links to microcephaly. The condition also has environmental causes, including foetal exposure to alcohol, drugs and viruses such as chicken pox and German measles.

The studies are headed by C Geoffrey Woods at Cambridge University and Christopher Walsh at the Boston Children's Hospital in Massachusetts.