

STRATEGIES ON PAK, AFGHAN

Obama rules out 'adjustment'



AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama has told lawmakers that no current changes are needed to his Afghanistan and Pakistan strategy, as US forces escalate operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Obama delivered the verdict, which had previously been voiced by senior members of his national security staff, as he handed over his administration's latest classified report on the conduct of the war mandated by Congress.

"We are continuing to implement the policy as described in

December and do not believe further adjustments are required at this time," Obama wrote in the assessment, delivered Monday.

"As the Congress continues its deliberations on the way ahead in Afghanistan and Pakistan, I want to continue to underscore our nation's interests in the successful implementation of this policy."

At the end of an exhaustive policy review in December, Obama announced plans to surge 30,000 troops into Afghanistan to seize the momentum in the long-running war but warned some

soldiers would begin to withdraw by July 2011.

The president is expected to mount a fresh review of strategy on Afghanistan by the end of the year, but again, no major adjustments are expected.

The NATO-led strategy is designed to push Taliban insurgents out of major towns in the south and east while building up Afghan government security forces so that American troops can start withdrawing by July 2011.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates and top commanders say there are tentative signs of progress in Afghanistan, where nearly 150,000 US and allied troops are trying to turn the tide against a resilient Islamist insurgency.

The White House said late Monday that Obama held a 30-minute videoconference with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, discussing "a number of topics, including the strategic vision for long term US-Afghan relations, the recent Afghan parliamentary elections, and regional relations."

"The two leaders agreed that they should continue routine engagements to refine a common vision and to align our efforts to support President Karzai's goal of completing transition to Afghan lead security responsibility by 2014," the White House said.

US drone kills Germans in Pakistan terror zone

AFP, Peshawar

A US drone strike has killed eight militants, including five Germans, in Pakistan's anarchic tribal belt where Western intelligence has traced an alleged plot to attack an array of targets in Europe.

"Five German rebels of Turkish origin and three local militants were killed in the strike," a Pakistani security official said late Monday.

Two other security officials confirmed to AFP that five German nationals were killed in the strike.

Germany said yesterday it had no information on the five German Islamists.

"Currently we have no information but we are investigating," a spokeswoman for the foreign ministry in Berlin told AFP.

The attack took place in Mir Ali Bazaar, 20 kilometres (12 miles) east of Miranshah, the main town of the North Waziristan tribal district bordering Afghanistan.

North Waziristan is a reputed hideout for militants linked to the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and is the operational epicentre of the latest plot reportedly uncovered by European and US intelligence agencies.

The attack came hours after Japan and Sweden joined Washington and London in issuing an alert warning of the "possible terrorist attack" by al-Qaeda and affiliated groups against their citizens travelling in Europe.



PHOTO: AFP

A Soyuz TMA-01M spacecraft is transported from the assembly hangar to its launch pad at the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan yesterday. The Soyuz, with US astronaut Scott Kelly, Russian cosmonauts Alexander Kaleri and Oleg Skripochka, is due to fly to the International Space Station on October 8.

Vatican slates Nobel to test tube baby pioneer

AP, Vatican City

The Vatican's top bioethics official said Robert Edwards, who received the Nobel Prize in medicine Monday for developing in vitro fertilisation, opened "a new and important chapter in the field of human reproduction" but is also responsible for the destruction of embryos and the creation of a "market" in donor eggs.

Monsignor Ignacio Carrasco de Paula, the newly appointed head of the Pontifical Academy for Life, said awarding the Nobel to Edwards is "not completely out of place." But he said it raised a great number of questions, not least because his research didn't treat the underlying problem of infertility but rather skirted it.

Edwards, an 85-year-old Briton who is professor emeritus at the University of Cambridge, won the prestigious award on Monday. The Nobel medicine prize committee said some 4 million people have been born through IVF.

The Vatican is opposed to IVF because it involves separating conception from the "conjugal act" -- sexual intercourse between a husband and wife -- and often results in the destruction of embryos. Church teaching holds that human life begins at conception, and must be given the consequent respect and dignity from that moment on.

Chile miners mark two months as trapped

AFP, Santiago

The 33 trapped miners in northern Chile were set yesterday to mark two months underground, as President Sebastian Pinera said he hoped to bring the workers to the surface by the end of next week.

"We're all happy that this miracle has been able to last," head psychologist Alberto Iturra told AFP after reporting all 33 miners were in an excellent physical and mental condition, despite the strain of being trapped for so long.

Earlier Pinera announced the new goal for their rescue would dramatically move up the previous timeline for freeing them from the mine in which they have been trapped since the August 5 collapse.

"I hope to rescue them before I leave for Europe. It is very important for me to share in this moment," he told reporters ahead of his planned trip starting October 15. "We are very close to rescuing them," he added.

Mines Minister Laurence Golborne previously announced the rescue could take place in the second half of October, several weeks earlier than planned, because drills were making swift progress toward opening a large enough hole to extract them from their emergency shelter 700 meters (2,200 feet) below ground.

China, Japan 'end spat' over maritime collision

AP, Brussels

Japan declared an end yesterday to a dispute with China over a high-seas collision last month and the two countries agreed to resume exchanges and projects that had been stopped because of the incident.

The breakthrough came after the prime ministers of the two countries held an impromptu after-dinner meeting in the corridor of an Asia-Europe summit.

But the Sino-Japan dispute over uninhabited islands in the East China Sea that led to the maritime clash last month remained unresolved, with both countries claiming possession.

The diplomatic confrontation threatened to dampen the atmosphere at the biannual Asia-European Union summit, or ASEM, as Prime Ministers Wen Jiabao of China and Naoto Kan studiously avoided each other during the first session of the 48-nation conference.

But then they walked out of the working dinner at the same time and "happened to meet in the corridor," said Satoru Satoh, the Japanese Foreign Ministry press secretary. They talked briefly and agreed to move past the maritime incident. Only the two men and their interpreters were there, he said.

"This particular incident is over," he told reporters in Brussels.

In Beijing, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said in a statement "both parties agreed to strengthen non-governmental exchanges and communications between the governments, and to hold high-level Chinese-Japanese talks at the appropriate time."

Despite the thaw, both sides remained firm on the territorial dispute: The statement said Wen reiterated that the uninhabited islands -- called Diaoyu by China and Senkaku by Japan -- belong to China.

Tokyo also made clear Japan was not compromising on its claim, which dates back to 1895.

Satoh said Japan sees no need to ask a third party or the UN's International Court of Justice to mediate the territorial dispute.

In Tokyo yesterday, Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara called on Beijing to meet and discuss ways the countries could avoid similar spats in the future.

"There is no territorial dispute in the East China Sea," he said at a press conference. "But I do understand the importance of Japanese-Chinese relations, and if on both sides we can put our heads together, we can find ways to prevent such unfortunate incidents from happening again in the future."

"Our window for negotiation is always open," Maehara said, pledging to work to restore ties with China.

The collision of a Chinese trawler with two Japanese patrol vessels last month and Japan's detention of the fishing boat captain plunged relations to their lowest level in five years, although last week ties appeared to be heading back on track.

The crash stirred up nationalism in both countries. Beijing suspended ministerial-level talks with Tokyo and postponed talks on jointly developing undersea gas fields. Japan released the captain, but Beijing shocked Tokyo by demanding an apology.

Beijing also apparently lifted a de facto export ban on rare earth materials needed in Japan for advanced manufacturing, but Japan's economic ministry said that it could not yet say whether shipments had resumed.

According to a survey of Japanese companies conducted last week by the ministry and released Tuesday, all 31 companies involved in such trade that responded to the survey said disruptions of the shipments increased since Sept. 21. They said exports were effectively blocked at numerous Chinese ports because of abnormal amounts of paperwork and increased inspections.

Egyptian newspaper sacks dissident chief editor

AP, Cairo

A leading independent Egyptian daily has fired its chief editor, an outspoken government critic, amid what journalists are calling a state crackdown on the media ahead of parliamentary elections.

Ibrahim Eissa's dismissal from Al-Dustour, announced in the paper Tuesday, comes as uncertainty has grown over Egypt's political future, with parliamentary elections less than two months away and constant speculation about the health of 82-year-old President Hosni Mubarak. Presidential elections are set for next year.

Eissa had long been a vocal critic of the government. Over the weekend, he was pulled from a popular talk show he hosted on a private satellite TV station, which the Journalists' Union condemned as "an organized attack on media freedoms."

Before his firing from the newspaper, Eissa warned of a government campaign against any criticism in the media, especially in light of approaching elections that activists expect to be marred by widespread fraud.

"The Egyptian regime cannot give up cheating in elections, so the only solution for the authorities is to stop any talk about rigging, rather than stopping the rigging itself," Eissa wrote in an editorial in Al-Dustour on Sunday.

Asif, Baki win bronze

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unfocused and erratic. The general consensus was that his sun had well and truly set.

But on Tuesday in the scorching heat in Delhi, Asif showcased once more the fleeting glimpses of his quite prodigious talent and what could have been. Partner Abdullah Hel Baki ably aided him in his quest, as the two shot a joint score of 1173 to capture the bronze medal in the men's 10m air rifle pairs event.

The Bangladeshi pair finished just one point behind English duo of James Huckle and Kenny Parr, who won the silver with a total of 1174 points.

The gold went to Indian pair Gagan Narang, a double world record holder and Olympic gold medalist Abhinav Bindra who soared above the competition with a tally of 1193.

For Asif and his partner, Bindra's meteoric rise to the champion that he is, might even be harder to swallow. The imperious Indian had finished behind Asif in the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in 2002, but his fortunes have been exactly the polar opposite to that of his Bangladeshi counterpart.

But despite all of this, Asif tried his best to crack a smile while his partner looked to hide behind the crowd in the 80-lane shooting unit of the rebuilt Dr Karni Singh Shooting Range.

The Bangladeshis will be disappointed at not having

been able to keep up their performance of the practice session and ultimately paid the price of a poor start by Baki and a slow finish by Asif.

Baki made a disappointing start tallying only 95 with his first 10 shots before recovering to finish with 583, which was still ten less than his ISSF World Championship score.

Asif's performance was exactly the opposite. He made a good start after hitting 99 and 100 in his first 20 shots but petered out towards the end with scores of 97, 98 and 98 to finish on 590, six less than his SA Games score of 596.

Bangladesh trailed England by 3 points going into the last ten shots, but despite shooting late into the day, they only managed to make up two points to finish heartbreakingly behind the English.

The Bangladeshi camp however was not willing to take the loss lightly, and alleged a veiled 'conspiracy' by the hosts. The authorities had rejected Baki's waist-belt prior to the start of the event and manager Imran Chowdhury was fuming at the move, which he claimed, unsettled his man.

"With that rejected belt, Baki competed in the ISSF World Championship but the judges here rejected his belt for thickness and that troubled him from the beginning," Chowdhury claimed. "It was a conspiracy by India, who always targets us."

Chowdhury also confirmed

his intention of lodging an official complaint regarding the issue.

The shooter Baki, however was less strung-out and was prepared to shoulder the brunt of the blame.

"I don't want to seek any excuses," a gloomy Baki said. "The day was not mine as I started on the wrong foot and I am trying to find out of what I did wrong."

Asif also admitted that he could have done better and said that the silver was not beyond their reach if they had both performed to their maximum.

"I wished to kick myself after seeing what I scored today," Asif said somewhat dramatically, stealing a glance at the electronic score board.

He however reiterated his desire to try his best in today's 10m air rifle individual event.

For his part, Bindra completed a golden hat-trick in the event in the Games. He claimed his first pair's gold in Manchester 2002 partnering Sameer Ambekar and then repeated the feat in the company of Narang in the Melbourne Games.

But he admitted that he had to work hard for yesterday's win.

"It was no cakewalk for us. No competition can be taken lightly. Especially performances at home. There were tremendous expectations, huge pressure. It was not easy for me for sure."

Indonesian flash floods kill 56

Dozens missing

AFP, Jakarta

At least 56 people were killed and 24 remain missing after flash floods in a remote region of Indonesia's West Papua province, a disaster management official said yesterday.

The floods were unleashed on Monday after torrential downpours that began late Sunday in West Papua's Teluk Wondama district.

"We just received information from local officials there that 56 people were killed and 24 people went missing," Dani Kismianto told AFP.

He said 81 people were seriously injured and most of them had been flown to hospitals in neighbouring districts of Nabire and Manokwari.

"We reckon that the death toll will increase as the terrain conditions make it hard for the rescuers to reach them," he said adding that the affected areas are mountainous.

Officials said that communication lines had been cut off and roads to the affected areas were blocked by fallen trees.

Welfare Minister Agung Laksono, quoted by state news agency Antara, said that besides houses, the floods had damaged schools and bridges in the area.

But he was unable to confirm the number of people displaced.

Those killed had reportedly drowned and been swept away by the powerful waters along with uprooted trees, rocks and debris.

The country's weather agency said on Monday that most parts of the country were currently experiencing torrential rains, strong winds, high waves and flooding, the Jakarta Globe newspaper reported.



PHOTO: AFP

A traffic lamp is seen at the plant of an Aluminium Production and Trade Company (MAL) in Ajka, Hungary yesterday as the factory was closed by the government. Hungary declared a state of emergency today after a toxic mud spill killed four people and injured 120 in what officials described as Hungary's worst-ever chemical accident.

Venezuela denies links to Basque militants

AP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez dismissed a claim that Basque militants received weapons training in his country, calling it a farce aimed at discrediting his government.

Chavez reacted Monday night in a telephone call to state television after a Spanish judge said two suspected members of the armed Basque separatist group ETA arrested in Spain last week had taken part in a weapons training course in Venezuela in 2008.

"It's a broken record," Chavez said, recalling past accusations of foreign militants finding refuge in Venezuela. "Now this other farce comes along... There's a permanent international conspiracy."

Chavez read aloud a statement from his foreign ministry denying any claims "that aim to link (the government) with the terrorist organization ETA."

The government statement said the testimony of "two bloodthirsty criminals" lacks credibility and suggested that they are making "absurd" claims to try to lessen the severity of their eventual sentences.