

AFGHAN WAR

Task force cautions Obama on high cost

REUTERS, Washington

An independent task force cautioned President Barack Obama yesterday about the high cost of the Afghanistan war and said he should consider a narrow military mission if his December review finds the current strategy is not working.

The 25-member task force, led by former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and former national security adviser Samuel Berger, said it saw "hopeful signs" in Afghanistan, such as improved training of security forces, but other trends were less encouraging.

"The cloudy picture and high costs raise the question of whether the United States should now downsize its ambitions and reduce its military presence in Afghanistan," the task force said in a 98-page report.

"We are mindful of the real threat we face. But we are also aware of the costs of the present strategy. We cannot accept these costs unless the strategy begins to show signs of progress," said the task force, which was sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations think tank.

Dan Markey, a South Asia analyst at the council who was project director for the report, said the findings were a "sober reflection of a Washington consensus that is increasingly skeptical and concerned" about the war.

The task force was composed of a broad range of former government officials, military leaders, academics and journalists with expertise in the region. The report was not requested by the Obama administration, but the task force did speak to officials involved with the issue.

The group gave a qualified endorsement to Obama's ambitious counterinsurgency-style strategy, but only if it is clearly making progress. **MORE LIMITED MISSION**

"If the December 2010 review of US strategy in Afghanistan concludes that the present strategy is not working, the task force recommends that a shift to a more limited mission at a substantially reduced level of military force would be warranted," the report said.

The administration's current strategy calls for US-led forces, including nearly 100,000 American troops, to disrupt al Qaeda and its Taliban allies while training Afghan military and police to take over security.

At the same time, foreign civilians are working to help improve Afghan governance in an effort to broaden popular support for the administration.

As the December review approaches, it is increasingly clear that defense officials believe the war plan is working but needs more time, despite rising casualties and worsening violence.

Administration officials have begun to downplay Obama's July 2011 deadline for beginning to hand over security to Afghan forces and withdraw US troops as conditions merit.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said this week they viewed Afghan President Hamid Karzai's plan to assume full responsibility for the country's security by 2014 as a realistic goal. NATO should endorse it this month.

Administration officials have indicated the strategy review is likely to bring only tweaks rather than a wholesale reappraisal of the war effort.



US President Barack Obama meets his Brazilian counterpart Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva at the start of the Opening Plenary Session at the G20 Summit in Seoul yesterday.

G20 vows to 'spare no effort' for Cancun climate meeting

AFP, Seoul

The world's 20 largest rich and emerging economies including China vowed Friday to "spare no effort" at upcoming climate change talks in Mexico, a year after Beijing stymied a deal in Copenhagen.

"We will spare no effort to reach a balanced and successful outcome in Cancun," the Group of 20 said in a statement issued at the end of two days of talks in Seoul.

The vow came less than three weeks before 194 countries meet in the Mexican resort city of Cancun for a second go at hammering out an agreement to curb greenhouse gases after 2012, when the current arrangement expires.

The climate gathering will take place in the lingering shadow of last December's Copenhagen summit, which ended in near-fiasco, due in no large part, critics say, to Chinese reluctance to agree to binding commitments.

"Addressing the threat of global climate change is an urgent priority for all nations," the G20 statement said.

"We reiterate our commitment to take strong and action-oriented measures and remain fully dedicated to UN climate change negotiations."

Despite the promise in Friday's statement, China has routinely voiced reluctance to take the lead in curbing greenhouse gases, saying it is not to blame for the situation the world is in now.

"Developed countries have their historic responsibility over climate change," Sun Zhen, a top China climate change official said earlier this month in Hong Kong. "There is no reason not to deal with this primary concern."

China and the United States clashed at a UN climate gathering last month in the Chinese city of Tianjin, accusing each other of blocking progress ahead of the Cancun summit.

The United States wants China, the world's largest source of the greenhouse gases blamed for climate change, to commit to curbing carbon emissions and developing countries to agree to more scrutiny of their climate claims.

China has rejected pressure for outside verification, saying it was a US attempt to divert attention from the fact the United States has so far failed to get emissions-cut legislation through Congress.

HAITI CHOLERA

UN appeals for aid to avoid being 'overrun'

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations yesterday appealed for nearly 164 million dollars in aid to tackle cholera in Haiti and avoid being "overrun" by the growing epidemic.

"We hope we can get this otherwise all our efforts will be overrun by the epidemic," said Elisabeth Byrs, a spokeswoman for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Byrs said UN, other aid agencies and Haiti's health ministry needed 163.8 million dollars for a strategy to stifle the sudden epidemic, which has infected more than 11,000 people and killed 724 since last month.

The strategy drawn up by the UN "anticipates up to 200,000 people to show symptoms of cholera ranging from cases of mild diarrhoea to the most severe dehydration" over a period of about six months, OCHA and the World Health Organisation said.

Rare disease kills 260 in Sudan in one year

Reports WHO

AFP, Khartoum

A rare parasitic disease has killed 260 people in southern Sudan in the past year, a figure that is threatening to double in the coming months, the World Health Organisation said on Thursday.

"Since September last year, 260 people died of kala azar in southern Sudan, most of them children who suffer from malnutrition," said Abdinasir Abubakar, head of the WHO in southern Sudan.

Kala azar, or visceral leishmaniasis, is a rare tropical disease contracted by the bite of a sand fly, endemic in some parts of southern Sudan.

Last week, the aid agency Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) warned that southern Sudan faced a "serious outbreak" of the tropical disease, especially in the remote states of Jonglei and Upper Nile.

"The most affected areas are (still) Jonglei and Upper Nile, particularly at Ayoka and Old Fangak (Jonglei) where more than half the cases are concentrated," said the WHO official.

More than 9,000 cases have been identified since September 2009, and that could represent the tip of the iceberg, the authorities say.

"We believe that the number of cases will double over the next five months," said Abubakar.

Visceral leishmaniasis, which attacks the immune system, usually manifests itself in patients with fever, weight loss and an enlarged spleen and liver.

About 500,000 cases are diagnosed each year, more than 90 percent of which are found in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sudan, and Brazil, according to the WHO.

Iraq power-sharing deal frayed as Maliki named PM

AFP, Baghdad

A power-sharing pact that saw Nuri al-Maliki named premier-designate of Iraq looked frayed yesterday after parliament ended in disarray over claims the deal was broken just hours after being sealed.

The dispute sparked a dramatic walk-out by a group of 60 MPs from a Sunni-backed bloc, underscoring the fragility of the agreement, which seeks to finally end the country's political impasse eight months after elections.

As part of the deal, brokered during three days of intense talks, President Jalal Talabani, re-elected by MPs, named Maliki as the country's prime minister on Thursday evening.

However, that was overshadowed by a dispute that prompted angry members of the Iraqiya bloc to storm out of the Council of Representatives chamber.

The support of Iraqiya, which narrowly won the March 7 poll and garnered most of its seats in Sunni areas, is seen as vital to preventing a resurgence of violence.

The Sunni Arab minority that dominated Saddam Hussein's regime was the bedrock of the anti-US insurgency after the 2003 invasion.

"Last night, it was clear, there are a lot of disagreements," independent Kurdish lawmaker Mahmud Othman told AFP on Friday.

"Last night showed that the agreement is shaky -- maybe it was signed behind closed doors, and when it came into the open, one side did not support it. If this means Iraqiya will not be participating in the government, that will create problems."

Obama lauds inclusive Iraq govt amid frictions

AP, Baghdad

President Barack Obama praised Iraqi moves to form an "inclusive" government on Friday, but the two-day-old deal was already looking fragile after Sunni lawmakers walked out of parliament, clouding the possibilities for working with Shiite Prime Minister Nourial-Maliki.

Members of the Sunni-backed Iraqiya bloc have accused al-Maliki's Shiite coalition of breaking promises under the deal, which aimed to overcome an eight-month deadlock and allow the creation of a new Iraqi government. Iraqiya lawmakers said they intended to press al-Maliki for explanations on Friday.

Members of the Sunni minority said they feared they were being squeezed out of a major role in power, fearing the new government would just be a continuation of the last four years of Shiite dominance with a strong role for the Shiite parties' ally Iran.

Oldest dino embryos unearthed

BBC ONLINE

Palaeontologists have identified the oldest known dinosaur embryos, belonging to a species that lived some 190 million years ago.

eating sauropods, such as Brontosaurus.

The study also sheds light on the dinosaurs' early development.

The researchers used the embryos to reconstruct what the dinosaurs' babies

the embryos were the oldest ones ever found of any land-dwelling vertebrate.

"This project opens an exciting window into the early history and evolution of dinosaurs," said Professor Reisz.

"Prosauropods are the first dinosaurs to diversify extensively, and they quickly became the most widely spread group, so their biology is particularly interesting as they represent in many ways the dawn of the age of dinosaurs."

'AWKWARD' BODIES
Massospondylus belonged to a group of dinosaurs known as prosauropods, the ancestors of sauropods - huge, four-legged dinosaurs with long necks.

Having studied the tiny (20cm-long) skeletons, the researchers noted that the embryos were almost about to hatch - but never had the chance.

Interestingly, the report says, the embryos looked quite different compared to the adult animals.

Once hatched, the babies would have had rather long front legs, meaning that they would have been walking on all fours rather than on two legs like the adults.

The embryos' heads were also disproportionately big, but it is believed the adult Massospondylus, which were about five metres in length, had relatively tiny heads and long necks.



The eggs of Massospondylus, containing well-preserved embryos, were unearthed in South Africa back in 1976.

The team writes in the Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology that the dino was an ancestor of the giant, plant-

might have looked like when they roamed the Earth.

Having studied the fossilised eggs, the team, led by Professor Robert Reisz of the University of Toronto Mississauga in Canada, discovered that

Suicide rates soar among US veterans

AFP, Washington

The economic downturn and the trauma of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have pushed more US veterans to suicide, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki said Thursday.

As Americans across the United States and around the world celebrated the contributions of men and women in uniform on Veterans Day, Shinseki outlined a sobering picture for the approximately 23 million veterans in the United States.

Only eight million of those veterans are currently registered with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Shinseki said. Many slip through the cracks due to crippling mental health problems, homelessness, alcohol and illegal drug abuse or crime.

Several studies have shown that suicides are on the rise among youths who have left the military.

"It's compounded by the stress, the

trauma that goes with the current operations, where we have a much smaller military being asked to do so much and then repeat it tour after tour," Shinseki told National Public Radio (NPR).

"I know the suicide numbers are up."

In January, he indicated that 20 percent of some 30,000 suicides in the United States each year are committed by veterans. That means that an average of 18 veterans commit suicide each year.

Suicides claimed the lives of a record 309 service members last year, up from 267 in 2008, according to Pentagon numbers. The number of suicides between 2005 and 2009 -- 1,100 -- exceeded that of the number of US military members killed in Afghanistan since 2001.

The Pentagon and the Department of Veterans Affairs do not keep statistics on veteran deaths.

Shinseki pointed to a backlog of Veterans Affairs cases or disability claims that has

soared to over 700,000 this year, up from 400,000 to 500,000 the year before.

He noted that the number of new cases has increased faster than his agency's capacity. Even though the Department of Veterans Affairs closed out 977,000 cases last year, it got another million new cases.

A large number of the new cases involve younger veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The Department of Veterans Affairs has changed its requirements regarding PTSD claims, so that veterans no longer have to prove they got the disorder because they served in a warzone. There has also long been a stigma in the military associated with psychological problems.

"If it's verified, that connection is now automatic, it's provided," Shinseki explained, noting this had increased the number of cases he has to address.

Clinton-Netanyahu meeting produces no breakthrough

AP, New York

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held lengthy talks here Thursday but failed to break an impasse that has stalled Middle East peace negotiations.

After multiple meetings over seven hours, some one-on-one and others with aides, Clinton and Netanyahu said in a joint statement that they had a "friendly and productive exchange of views on both sides" and "agreed on the importance of continuing direct negotiations to achieve our goals."

But there was no sign that the talks, which have been on hold since mid-September in a dispute over Israeli settlement building, might resume soon.

Earlier, as the meeting began, Netanyahu said Israel is "quite serious" about reaching a final peace deal with the Palestinians and hopes to broaden the effort to include other Arab countries.

The Israeli leader said he and Clinton had been consulting by phone "quite intensively" over the last few weeks but had not met face-to-face since an opening round of talks in Jerusalem in September.

The talks broke off shortly after that session, and the Palestinians have insisted they will not resume until Israel halts construction in Jewish settlements.

"We've been talking and will talk today about how to resume them to continue this process to get the historic agreement with peace and security between us and the Palestinians," Netanyahu said.

"I would like to add that we also hope to broaden it to many other Arab countries. So this is our common goal. We're quite serious about doing it and we want to get on with it."

Asked by a reporter whether peace talks would resume soon, Clinton replied, "That's what we're going to be discussing. We're both very committed to it."

On Wednesday, Clinton criticized Israel's proposal to build 1,300 apartments in east Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want to make the capital of their future state. Israel captured east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war.

Palestinian objections to the construction of Jewish settlements in Israeli-occupied parts of the West Bank and east Jerusalem have thrown a wrench into peace talks, which had resumed in September after an interruption of nearly two years.

The United States and other countries are helping the Palestinians set up a government for an independent state. On Wednesday, Clinton announced an additional \$150 million in aid for the effort.

Russia's spies must learn from betrayal

Medvedev says

REUTERS, Seoul

President Dmitry Medvedev told Russia's once mighty spy agency yesterday to put its house in order after a senior spymaster betrayed a network of agents to the United States.

The Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) is grappling with the network's betrayal by the head of Moscow's deep cover spying operations in the United States, one of Russia's most serious intelligence failures since the end of the Cold War.

"There should be an internal investigation and lessons should be drawn," Medvedev told reporters at a briefing after the Group of 20 summit in Seoul.

Asked about a report in the newspaper Kommersant which broke the story, Medvedev said: "For me the Kommersant publication is not news, I knew about it on the day it happened."

Kommersant identified the man as Colonel Shcherbakov and said he was responsible for unmasking a Russian spy ring in the United States in June. The arrest of its members humiliated Moscow just days after a summit in Washington between Medvedev and President Barack Obama.

The detained agents were exchanged in July for Russians suspected of spying for the West in a Cold War-style spy swap.

They returned to a heroes' welcome in Moscow, singing patriotic songs with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, himself a former KGB spy, and receiving awards from Medvedev at a private Kremlin ceremony.



Marchers carry photos of World War II veterans during the annual Veterans Day parade on Thursday in New York City. The nation's largest Veterans Day parade features approximately 20,000 participants and more than 3,000 active duty servicemen and women who parade up Fifth Avenue.