

Obama sets in motion US pullout from Afghanistan

REUTERS, Washington

US President Barack Obama announced a phased pullout of troops to end a costly war in Afghanistan, but the country faced fresh turmoil after a court overturned results from last year's fraudulent election.

Obama's plan to withdraw 10,000 troops by the end of the year and a further 23,000 by the end of next summer won immediate support from France's president.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Washington's ally in a relationship made uneasy by allegations of incompetence and corruption, welcomed the plan and said Afghans increasingly trusted their security forces.

But the Afghan Taliban, resurgent a decade after being toppled from power following the September 11,

2001 attacks, dismissed the announcement and said only a full, immediate withdrawal of foreign forces could stop "pointless bloodshed."

They rejected any suggestion of US military gains.

In a prime-time televised appearance Wednesday, Obama said he would withdraw 10,000 troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2011, with a further 23,000 by the end of next summer. Remaining troops would be steadily withdrawn after that.

He vowed that the United States -- struggling to restore its global image, shore up the economy and reduce unemployment at home -- would exercise new restraint with military power.

"Tonight, we take comfort in knowing that the tide of war is receding," Obama said in a 15-minute

statement, heralding the gradual reduction of US forces in Iraq and limited US involvement in the international air campaign against Libya.

"America, it is time to focus on nation building at home."

Obama's plan, which will bring home the entire "surge" force he sent to Afghanistan in 2010, pits him against military advisers unhappy at the prospect of any hasty drawdown.

The cuts went further than many expected, in particular options offered by General David Petraeus, outgoing commander of US and Nato troops in Afghanistan, now due to lead the CIA.

Outgoing Defence Secretary Robert Gates backed Obama's plan. But it is unlikely to sit well with the Pentagon's top brass who worry insurgents could regain lost territory.

Even after the withdrawal of

33,000 troops, about 70,000 will remain, about twice the number when Obama took office. Some US lawmakers, impatient with a war that costs more than \$110 billion a year, said Obama should have cut deeper and faster.

Since the killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, the Obama administration has argued more forcefully that it must adopt a narrow, defensive approach to Afghanistan, focussing on lawless havens insurgents can use to launch attacks.

A senior military official in Pakistan, where Washington has been seeking intensified efforts against militants, said Obama's strategy would be successful if accompanied by "a robust and strong political effort" to engage the Taliban.

Afghan court overturns poll results

AFP, Kabul

An Afghan special court overturned a string of results yesterday from last year's fraudulent parliamentary polls, causing deep splits in the political system with US troops poised to start withdrawing.

The head of the tribunal, Sidiquallah Haqiq, read out a list of provinces where results had been recalculated at a press conference in Kabul.

Lawmaker Mohammad Farhad Azimi, deputy secretary to the lower house, said that up to 60 separate results from the 249 seat Wolesi Jirga were affected.

The court's move threatens to reopen deep splits between President Hamid Karzai and lawmakers opposed to him, potentially seizing up the heart of the political system shortly before foreign troops pullout.

NEWS IN brief

Somali president appoints new prime minister

AFP, Mogadishu

Somali President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed yesterday appointed Abdiweli Mohamed Ali as prime minister replacing Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed who resigned under a reconciliation accord.

"He has the personality and the kind of knowledge that makes him fit to become the prime minister," the president said in announcing Ali's appointment.

"I'm quite confident that he will be up to the challenge of the hard conditions our country is encountering."

Ali is a former deputy prime minister and former

ICC prosecutor seeks to open Ivory Coast probe

AFP, The Hague

The International Criminal Court's prosecutor asked judges Thursday for permission to probe alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity after Ivory Coast's disputed election, his office said.

Newly-inaugurated Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara asked the court in a letter on May 3 to investigate "the most serious crimes", after a six-month wave of violence swept the restive west African state.

Some 3,000 people were killed and more than 300,000 others were displaced, according to UN estimates, when former Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo refused to accept that he had lost a run-off

Dutch anti-Islam lawmaker Wilders acquitted

AFP, Amsterdam

Dutch far-right lawmaker Geert Wilders walked away from hate speech and discrimination charges yesterday for statements made attacking Islam, calling his acquittal a victory for freedom of speech.

The flamboyant MP faced five counts of hate speech and discrimination for his anti-Islamic remarks on websites, Internet forums and in Dutch newspapers between October 2006 and March 2008, and in his controversial 17-minute movie "Fitna" ("Discord" in Arabic).

He also compared the Koran with Hitler's "Mein Kampf" while in "Fitna" he used shocking images of the September 11 attacks in the United States and other onslaughts against Western targets interspersed with verses from the Muslim holy book.

Winklevoss twins end legal row with Facebook

BBC ONLINE



The Winklevoss brothers, Harvard contemporaries of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, ended their legal battle with the social network yesterday.

They reached a \$65m settlement in 2008, after claiming that Zuckerberg

stole their idea. A US appeals court ruled in April that they could not back out of the deal.

The pair had threatened to go to US Supreme Court to overturn the decision but have now said

Congo former rebels accused of mass rape

BBC ONLINE

Aid workers said yesterday at least 60 women have been raped near the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo town of Fizi in between June 10-June 12.

The mass rapes were allegedly committed by a group of ex-rebels who recently deserted the army, which they had joined under a peace deal.

Troops from the same group were recently convicted of raping at least 50 women in Fizi on New Year's Day.

The 16 years of unrest in eastern DR Congo have become notorious for the widespread sexual abuse of women and young girls.

Children swim in a flooded street after heavy rains in Valenzuela City, north of Manila yesterday. Ten fishermen were missing at sea and thousands of people fled their homes in the Philippines as tropical storm Meari unleashed widespread flooding.

PHOTO: AFP



Indian fever outbreak kills 40 children

AFP, Patna

A deadly fever believed to be caused by a type of encephalitis has killed as many as 40 children in an impoverished region of eastern India, health experts said yesterday.

The children died during the past week in Bihar's Muzaffarpur district after experiencing high fevers followed by convulsions and unconsciousness, prompting the federal government to rush medical teams to the state.

State Health Minister Ashwani Kumar Choubey said that experts were in the process of identifying the exact cause of the deaths.

Asia has more millionaires than Europe

AFP, Hong Kong

The number of millionaires in Asia-Pacific has jumped sharply to overtake Europe, a study revealed yesterday, driven by the fast-rising super-rich of Hong Kong.

Millionaires in the region -- who have a total of almost \$11 trillion -- became worth more collectively than their counterparts in Europe in 2009, but there are also now more of them, at 3.3 million, versus 3.1 million in Europe.

The report on high-net worth individuals (HNWIs) -- defined as anyone with investable assets of at least \$1 million -- was issued by Merrill Lynch Global Wealth Management

and consultancy firm Capgemini.

Asia is now second only to North America, which has 3.4 million millionaires.

The number of millionaires in Hong Kong grew 33.3 percent in 2010 to 101,300, compared with 76,000 in 2009 -- the second straight year in which the city's super-rich population grew the most.

The rocketing number of millionaires in the southern Chinese city was due to a healthy economy as well as gains in the equities and real estate markets, said the report.

It also noted the fast growth of Indian millionaires, where the HNW population became the world's 12th largest in 2010, its highest placing.

UN vote might not be on Palestinian statehood: Ashton

AFP, Jerusalem

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said she was not certain the UN will vote on backing a Palestinian state in September, in an interview with Haaretz newspaper published.

Speaking to the newspaper following a visit to the region over the weekend, Ashton said the substance of the resolution which will be put to a vote had not yet been pinned down.

"It will depend very much on what the resolution says as to how the international community in general, and the EU in particular, votes," the European Union's top diplo-

mat told the paper.

The Palestinians are hoping to seek UN membership and recognition of their state on the 1967 lines when the 192-member body meets in September.

Israel fears such a vote could spark what has been described as a "diplomatic tsunami" against the Jewish state, and many key figures in the international community are seeking ways to head off potentially volatile developments that may result.

Ashton is working to convene an urgent session of the diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East in the coming weeks, possibly in Washington early July, diplomatic sources in Brussels told AFP.

Yemeni president not returning home soon

REUTERS, Sanaa

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh is not likely to return home soon from Saudi Arabia, where he is recovering from serious injuries suffered in an attack on his palace this month, a Western diplomat said yesterday.

The United States and Saudi Arabia are pushing Saleh to hand over power to his deputy under a Gulf Arab proposal aimed at ending unrest that has pushed Yemen close to a civil war.

"We believe he was seriously injured ... He is not coming (home) in the coming days, he is not coming (home) soon," the diplomat told Reuters.

The United States has been helping Yemen investigate the attack, which killed several people and also wounded the prime minister, two deputy prime ministers and the speakers of both parliamentary chambers.

The diplomat said an initial investigation showed Saleh was injured in the explosion from a TNT charge planted inside a mosque within the presidential palace in Sanaa on June 3.

Yemeni officials earlier accused an opposition tribal coalition of shelling the palace, a charge they denied.

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