

## Blast kills 11 women, children in Afghanistan

AFP, Kandahar

A bomb attack killed 11 women and children from two families, destroying their vehicle in southern Afghanistan, officials yesterday said.

The device planted on the side of the road struck their minivan on Friday afternoon in Gereshk district of Helmand province, one of the toughest battlegrounds in a 10-year Taliban insurgency.

"Five women and a child from one family, and four women and two children from another family were killed in the blast," the Helmand governor's spokesman, Daud Ahmadi, told AFP.

Ahmadi later clarified that eight women, not nine, were killed, along with two children aged seven to 12, and a third child under seven.

He identified a 12th victim as a young man in his 20s who was driving the minibus.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but Ahmadi blamed enemies of Afghanistan for the blast, a term used by Afghan officials to refer to Taliban insurgents.

Farid Ahmad Farhang, Helmand police spokesman, confirmed the death toll.

Roadside bomb attacks are the weapon of choice for Taliban insurgents fighting to overthrow the Western-backed government of President Hamid Karzai.

Explosives are frequently planted to target Nato and government forces, but civilians are often the victims.

The United Nations says that of the 1,145 civilians killed in the war in the first six months of this year, 80 percent were killed by insurgents and more than half by roadside bombs.



PHOTO: AFP

Right-wing Hindu organisation Shiv Sena activists and shopkeepers burn an effigy of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during a demonstration against the foreign direct investment (FDI) in multi-brand retail, in Amritsar, India yesterday.

## Indian PM defends 'rush of reforms' amid protests

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday defended a string of economic reforms unveiled by his government, despite protests over higher fuel prices and new foreign investment rules.

Criticised for perceived policy paralysis, Manmohan Singh reportedly pushed for the decision at the meeting of the cabinet committee on economic affairs (CCEA) on Friday, saying the UPA government needs to "bite the bullet" if it has to.

"We have to bite the bullet. If we have to go down, let us go down fighting," the prime minister was quoted by sources as having said at the meeting.

Singh, speaking to ministers and advisers in New Delhi, yesterday said the reforms were needed to revive flagging economic growth, improve the invest-

ment climate and boost public finances.

"The recent increase in diesel prices is an important step in the right direction," he said, following a decision on Thursday to hike the heavily subsidised price of the fuel by 12 percent.

Truckers unions have since threatened to go on strike and there were protests on Friday over the halving of the number of subsidised cooking gas cylinders available to households per year.

On Friday, the cabinet also cleared highly contentious new rules inviting foreign supermarkets into the Indian retail sector and allowing foreign airlines to take stakes in domestic carriers.

"To achieve the target of 8.2 percent growth (contained in a new five-year economic plan), we need to revive investment in the economy. The invest-

ment environment is therefore critical," Singh said.

India was dependent on inflows of foreign capital because of imbalances in its spending and consumption patterns, the under-fire 79-year-old explained.

However, BJP yesterday vehemently opposed the decision to allow FDI in retail trade and charged the government with taking the decision at the behest of "foreign pressure".

"FDI in retail is not the need of the country at this moment. As far as Walmart is concerned, they won't come for charity. They are coming for profit. They want market. Allowing FDI for infrastructure development is not true", BJP spokesman Prakash Javadekar told a press conference here.

Fuming over the "anti-people" decisions of allowing overseas investments in multi-brand retail and diesel

## Accolades, political risks for Suu Kyi in US

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi will be feted by US President Barack Obama and given a top honour in her first visit in two decades to the United States, which has been an ardent supporter of her democracy struggle.

Suu Kyi, who will leave Myanmar today, is destined for a red carpet welcome during her first visit to the US since she began her campaign for democracy -- marked by years of house arrest -- under the junta in 1988.

The Nobel laureate, who was elected to parliament this year in a dramatic sign of the country's reforms, will travel to Washington to meet Obama whose government has been at the forefront of Western re-engagement with the long-time military dominated country.

"This will be a high-profile trip for Aung San Suu Kyi, who has significant star power in the US," said independent Myanmar analyst Richard Horsey, adding that it would be a chance to "showcase her international support".

"But there are also political risks

involved."

Unlike Suu Kyi's trip to Europe this year -- where she received a rapturous welcome -- her visit will coincide with that of Myanmar's President Thein Sein, who is due in the US later in the month to attend the United Nations General Assembly.

"There is a risk that she will overshadow this significant first US visit by Thein Sein -- who has not yet really gotten the international recognition that he deserves for the remarkable reform process that he has put in place, he said."

Suu Kyi will receive the Congressional Gold Medal, the top honour bestowed by the US Congress, which she obtained in May 2008 when the prospect of her leaving Myanmar looked remote.

Her near three-week visit will also see her hold talks at the United Nations, give speeches in Washington and New York and meet members of the Burmese diaspora in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

She is also likely to be quizzed on the changes that have swept through her country since junta rule was replaced by a quasi-civilian government last year.

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possible only because of favourable political will.

"Now that the local political leaders have agreed to listen to road safety experts, we are going to remove all the bumps from Dhaka-Mawa highway and replace those with rumble strips," said the RHD engineer.

"Rumble strips do not force a vehicle to slow down but caution an inattentive driver," said Rahman.

The 2.2 lakh-kilometre network of the country's highways and regional and feeder roads is full of speed breakers, mostly built illegally by locals following road crashes. There are instances that traders, who have businesses along highways, raised funds for building speed bumps to slow down traffic in the area.

"It is a result of lawlessness on our highways where reckless driving is the most common feature," said an engineer of RHD.

"We have a culture of setting up markets by highways and other main roads and reckless drivers add to the insecurity of the road users. In cases when hundreds of locals block a highway after an accident, it becomes difficult to prevent them from taking up the law in their own hands," added the official explaining how illegal bumps are set up.

RHD sources said the National Road Safety Council of Bangladesh forbids build-

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of interest.

TIB Chairperson Sultana Kamal said parliament proceedings must be made accessible to people to ensure that lawmakers were accountable. At present, there was no mechanism to ensure their accountability, as people have little access to parliamentary proceedings, she added.

"Therefore, MPs can get away with saying anything in the House and we cannot hold them responsible."

TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said that parliament in Bangladesh was far from being fully open to people, who have every right to know what is happening in the House.

Few countries have seen the kind of a culture of parliament boycott that has dogged Bangladesh. The practice of boycotting the House while in opposition began in the fifth Jatiya Sangsad. The rate of parliament boycott in the fifth parliament was 34 percent and in the present parliament (13th), it was already over 80 percent, TIB said.

Both Sultana Kamal and Iftekharuzzaman observed

that bitter rivalries between the leader of the House and the leader of the opposition was the main obstacle to making the House effective and democracy functional.

They deplored the fact that the two leaders did not exchange greetings in and outside parliament.

Sultana observed that the top leaders of the Awami League and the BNP could settle all problems, including how fair elections could be held.

According to TIB, the House rarely disclosed any information about MPs and government officials. Though contact numbers of officials have been made public, in the case of MPs even their attendances at parliament have never been disclosed.

The watchdog called upon the government to ensure an effective and pro-people parliament.

It also demanded that the income and wealth statements of MPs be disclosed and periodically updated and information about parliamentary proceedings be put up on a government website on a regular basis.

## Anti-US outrage spreading

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Egypt's Sinai Peninsula were among the latest targets in protests that turned violent.

As violence escalates in Arab and Muslim worlds, Dhaka condemns the release of the film, "The Innocence of Muslims", saying the video is not only offensive, but also reprehensible, reports our correspondent.

"Bangladesh is concerned that some have tried to defend such offensive material on the pretext of freedom of expression. Inciting hatred cannot be justified citing freedom of expression," a foreign ministry statement said yesterday.

"Such disregard for the religious sensitivity of Muslims, or of any faith, cannot constitute civilised

behaviour and must not be condoned."

Yesterday, Pope Benedict XVI urged Middle Eastern Christians and Muslims to forge a harmonious, pluralistic society in which the dignity of each person is respected and the right to worship in peace is guaranteed.

Speaking to political and religious leaders on the second day of a three-day trip to Lebanon, he stressed that people must repudiate vengeance, acknowledge their own faults and offer forgiveness to each other.

Meeting the pontiff at the presidential palace, the mufti or spiritual leader of Lebanon's Sunni Muslims told Pope that he would consider "any attack on a

Christian as an attack on all

Muslims."

Mohammed Rashid Kabbani added that he also considered "any attack on a church as equivalent to an attack on mosque, because our religion prohibits us from doing so."

Kabbani's remarks were included in a letter he handed to the pope, as the pontiff also met leaders of the Shia, Druze and Alawite communities, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, insurgents have attacked Nato's heavily fortified Camp Bastion base in southern Afghanistan.

At least two US marines died when militants breached the perimeter of the sprawling base in Helmand province.

The Taliban told the BBC that they carried out the

attack in revenge for a film mocking Islam which has triggered protests around the Muslim world.

The UK's Prince Harry began a second tour of duty at the base just over a week ago, but is said to be unharmed.

Top Western diplomats warned leaders in countries where the unrest has been most pronounced to ensure the protection of its missions and its people.

"I am following the unfolding events with grave concern and call on national authorities in all countries concerned to swiftly ensure the security of diplomatic mission and protect diplomatic staff," Catherine Ashton, the European Union foreign affairs chief, said in a statement.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton took it one step further, reports CNN. She warned that the United States would take action to protect its diplomatic facilities if the countries in question did not stop the violence and seek justice for the attacks.

From Morocco to Malaysia, thousands of Muslims have taken to the streets in recent days -- with sometimes deadly results -- over the release of the video.

Despite the firm condemnation by US government officials, some in the Muslim world -- especially those raised in regimes in which the government must authorize any film production -- cannot accept that a movie like "Innocence of Muslims" can be produced without being sanctioned by Washington, said Council of Foreign Relations scholar Ed Husain.

The demonstrations, notably, haven't all been violent and the protesters represent only a fraction of their respective nations' populations: A few thousands, for example, clashed with security forces outside the US embassy in Cairo, in a city of more than 18 million people.

But protests that have turned violent have led to a number of deaths -- including those of the US ambassador to Libya and three other Americans killed in an attack Tuesday in Benghazi, Libya.

At least six people were killed and dozens wounded in the clashes across the Muslim world that followed.

CLASH IN AUSTRALIA Australia became the latest nation to cope with protests as hundreds of demonstrators clashed with police Saturday outside the US consulate in Sydney.

The demonstration turned violent after protesters were pushed back from the building by police.

Authorities used tear gas and police dogs to disperse protesters who threw bottles and shoes -- considered a grave insult among Muslims, according to witnesses and police video.

At least four people were injured, including a police officer who was hit in the face with a bottle, according to witnesses and authorities.

Here's a breakdown of events Saturday around the globe:

In Egypt's northern Sinai, a large number of security forces backed by tanks regained control of a base housing an international peacekeeping force that was breached Friday by Islamist militants, state-run EGYnews reported yesterday.

The militants carrying automatic weapons burned trucks and a watch tower on the base. The armed clashes injured at least four troops and an Islamist Bedouin.

The 1,500-troop mission has supervised the security of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty since 1979.

In the Egyptian capital of Cairo, large numbers of police were patrolling the streets following clashes shortly after dawn Saturday between protesters and plain-clothes security officers.

In Tunisia, authorities warned yesterday the death toll may climb following Friday's attack on the US Embassy in Tunis that left two dead.

The German and British embassies in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, shored up their security after protesters managed to get inside a compound that is shared by both diplomatic missions, according to the foreign ministers of both nations.