

US anger as Afghanistan releases 65 'insurgents'

AFP, Kabul

Scores of alleged Taliban fighters walked free from jail in Afghanistan yesterday, triggering condemnation from the United States which said they were responsible for killing NATO and Afghan soldiers as well as civilians.

The release of the prisoners further worsened the bitter relationship between Kabul and Washington as US-led foreign troops prepare to withdraw after 13 years fighting the Islamist militants.

"The 65 prisoners were freed and walked out of the Bagram prison compound this morning," Abdul Shukor Dadras, a member of the Afghan government's review body, told AFP.

"Their cases were reviewed and we had no reason to keep them in jail."

The US embassy criticised the releases as "a deeply regrettable" move that could lead to further violence in Afghanistan, which has suffered a bloody Taliban insurgency since 2001.

"The Afghan government bears responsibility for the results of its decision," the embassy said in a statement.

"We urge it to make every effort to ensure that those released do not commit new acts of violence and terror."

But President Hamid Karzai has called Bagram prison a "Taliban-producing factory" and alleged that some detainees were tortured into hating their country.

The US military described the men as "dangerous individuals" directly linked to attacks which killed or wounded 32 NATO personnel and 23 Afghans.

It gave names and details of three men to be freed, including Mohammad Wali, whom it described as a suspected Taliban explosives expert "biometrically linked" to two bombings against troops in Helmand province.

"Violent criminals who harm Afghans and threaten the peace and security of Afghanistan should face justice in the Afghan courts," the US force said in a statement.



Indian parliament erupts in chaos over Telangana

AFP, New Delhi

India's parliament erupted in chaos yesterday over a bill to create a new state, as angry MPs came to blows and pulled out a microphone and one pepper-sprayed the chamber.

Holding banners and shouting slogans, lawmakers disrupted the lower house of parliament as the Congress-led government introduced the contentious bill to carve a new state out of the existing Andhra Pradesh.

Legislators opposed to the new state of Telangana tried to rip out the speaker's microphone while one unleashed a can of capsicum spray, prompting a rush for the exit, TV channels reported.

Several lawmakers climbed into ambulances suffering breathing problems before reportedly being taken to hospital.

Small fights also flared between MPs opposed to the bill and several trying to stop the chaos and restore order, as the parliament -- known for its disruptions -- was adjourned, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kamal Nath slammed the unrest as a "big blot on our parliamentary democracy" and called for the strongest possible action against the offending MPs.

"It is the most shameful day in our parliamentary history," Nath told reporters outside

parliament.

Seventeen MPs were suspended from the house over the behaviour, which also saw lawmakers rip up official papers and smash a glass. Others wore black blindfolds as a sign of protest, PTI said.

In the confusion one MP from Andhra Pradesh, who opposes Telangana, was accused of brandishing a knife in the chamber, a claim he denied.

Cabinet last week approved the creation of Telangana from the south-eastern state of Andhra Pradesh, after a decades-long and sometimes violent campaign.

Mainly tribal groups have demanded Telangana be carved out of a northern, impoverished and drought-prone part of Andhra Pradesh, which supporters say has long been neglected by successive state governments.

But wealthier regions of Andhra Pradesh, home to IT giants including Google and Microsoft in its capital Hyderabad, have strongly opposed the split because they say it would create economic upheaval.

Outside parliament, ugly clashes broke out between supporters of the Telangana state and police, an AFP photographer said.

Police dragged away protesters and bundled them into buses.

Congress has denied trying to seek any political advantage from splitting Andhra Pradesh, insisting it is trying to fulfil a long-standing pledge.

Speaker suspends 17 MPs
Pepper spray used inside House

Car blast hits cops in Karachi; twelve killed

AFP, Karachi

The Pakistani Taliban yesterday claimed credit for a bomb blast that killed 12 policemen on a bus, the latest in a series of near-daily attacks since the government called for peace talks with militants.

The explosion in the commercial hub of Karachi, which wounded almost 60 others, comes as Pakistan has been negotiating with the Taliban to end their seven-year insurgency that has claimed thousands of lives.

Raja Umer Khatab, chief of the city's counter-terrorism unit, said a small Suzuki van had been parked on the hard shoulder along the bus's route and was remotely detonated when the two vehicles were side by side.

Doctor Semi Jamali at Karachi's Jinnah hospital said 58 people were injured, including civilian passers-by. Nine of the injured police were in critical condition.

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan spokesman Shahidullah Shahid told AFP it was a revenge attack for the killing of militants.

"Our defensive war will continue until an agreement is reached on a ceasefire" between negotiation teams representing the government and the Taliban.

The attack was the 11th since Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced talks on January 29 and said he wants to "give peace another chance".



An unidentified member of India's parliament, holding a handkerchief to his face after being affected by pepper spray, leaves parliament after protests inside the building in New Delhi, yesterday. Inset, A demonstrator demanding a separate state of Telangana is detained by policemen outside the parliament building.

PHOTO: AFP

POST-NATO AFGHAN FUTURE Leaders hold fresh talks in Turkey

AFP, Ankara

Afghan and Pakistani leaders were expected to discuss security in Afghanistan after the Nato troop pullout and efforts to negotiate with the Taliban when they met in Turkey yesterday.

Turkish President Abdullah Gul hosted Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif over dinner late Wednesday, on the eve of the summit opening.

It is the eighth in Turkey since a regular consultation mechanism was established in 2007 to encourage the neighbours to cooperate in the fight against extremist groups.

The talks will primarily focus on ways to restore peace and promote reconciliation in Afghanistan, a senior Pakistani official told AFP.

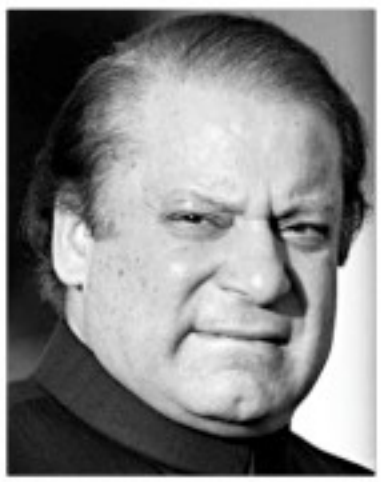
Sharif emphasised ahead of the summit the need for peace and stability in its neighbourhood as US-led troops prepare to withdraw.

"Peace and stability in Afghanistan has a direct bearing on Pakistan. We support a sovereign, independent and united Afghanistan. The drawdown of Nato/ISAF by the end of the year as part of the security transition, will be a watershed event," he told Turkey's Hurriyet Daily News.

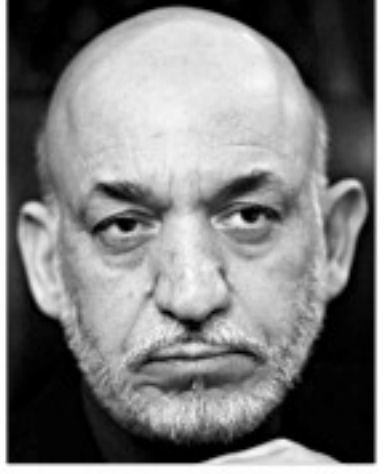
Karzai has long accused Pakistan of sheltering Taliban militants waging the insurgency against his government.

Intelligence officials and high-level military officials from the two countries were expected to hold closed-door talks on the sidelines of the Ankara meeting, the theme of which is "sustainable peace in the heart of Asia".

Karzai, who is due to step down after presidential polls on April 5, is pushing for Pakistan to help start peace talks with the Taliban.



Nawaz Sharif



Hamid Karzai



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Aussie father kills son at cricket field

AFP, Melbourne

A mother spoke of her shock yesterday after her estranged husband killed their 11-year-old son at cricket practice before being shot dead by police in front of horrified onlookers in suburban Australia.

Luke Batty was beaten, reportedly with a cricket bat to the head, soon after training with his junior team on Wednesday evening at the Tyabb oval on the Mornington Peninsula, 100 kilometres south-east of Melbourne.

He suffered significant injuries and died at the scene. Reports said he was also stabbed, although this could not be confirmed. Police said they arrived to find the father Greg, 54, armed with a knife. When capsicum, or pepper spray failed to subdue him, he was shot once in the chest.

The tragedy left mother Rosie Batty, originally from Britain, traumatised. She was just metres away when the attack took place.

She told reporters her estranged husband had a history of mental illness and was the subject of an apprehended violence disorder, but it allowed him to visit the boy at his cricket training.