

US halts cluster bomb sales to Saudis: report

AFP, Washington

The Obama administration has moved to block sales of cluster bombs to Saudi Arabia for use in Yemen, amid reports of mounting civilian casualties there, a US media report said Saturday.

The report in the journal Foreign Policy, citing US officials, said that the White House had quietly placed a hold on the transfer of such munitions to the Sunni kingdom as it carries out a bloody war on Shia rebels in Yemen.

A Saudi-led coalition has been fighting the Iranian-backed Huthis since March 2015, trying to roll back their control of wide swaths of Yemen.

Asked by AFP for comment, an administration official said that "we are aware of reports that the Saudi-led coalition used cluster munitions in the armed conflict in Yemen, including in areas in which civilians are alleged to have been present."

"We take such concerns seriously and are seeking additional information," the official added.

Foreign Policy said it was the first concrete display of unease by US officials over bombings that human rights activists say have killed and injured hundreds of civilians, including children.

The US antiwar group CodePink yesterday applauded the administration decision, and called on President Barack Obama to suspend all arms transfers to the kingdom.

Cluster bombs are designed to kill enemy personnel and destroy vehicles or runways.

But because they disperse scores of tiny bomblets over a wide area, they pose a particular threat to civilians. They were banned by an international treaty in 2008, but Russia and the United States, both major suppliers, failed to sign it.

'Nuke-armed Pakistan can target Delhi in 5 minutes'

PTI, Islamabad

Nuclear-armed Pakistan has the ability to "target" the Indian capital Delhi in five minutes, the father of Pakistan's nuclear programme Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan has said.

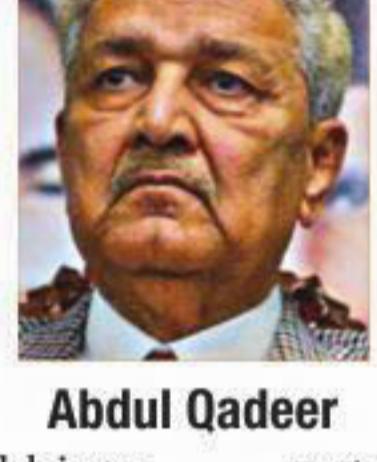
Addressing a gathering here on the 18th anniversary of Pakistan's first nuclear tests, which were carried out under his supervision in 1998, Khan said Pakistan could have become a nuclear power as early as 1984 but the then President General Zia ul Haq "opposed the move".

The 80-year-old nuclear physicist said General Zia, who was Pakistan's President from 1978 to 1988, opposed the nuclear testing as he believed that the world would intervene militarily.

Further, it would have also curtailed international aid Pakistan was receiving due to the ongoing Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

"We were able and we had a plan to launch nuclear test in 1984. But President General Zia ul Haq had opposed the move," Khan said on Saturday.

Khan also said that Pakistan has the ability to "target" Delhi from Kahuta near



Abdul Qadeer

Rawalpindi in five minutes. Kahuta is the home to the Kahuta Research Laboratories (KRL), Pakistan's key uranium enrichment facility, linked to the atomic bomb project.

Khan was disgraced in 2004 when he was forced to accept responsibility for nuclear technology proliferation and was forced to live a life of official house arrest. In 2009, the Islamabad high court declared Khan to be a free citizen of Pakistan, allowing him free movement inside the country.

He regretted the treatment and said Pakistan would never have achieved the feat of becoming first Muslim nuclear country without his "services".

"Without my services Pakistan would never have been the first Muslim nuclear nation. We were able to achieve the capability under very tough circumstances, but we did it," said Khan.

Referring to the treatment meted out to him during Gen Pervez Musharraf's era, Khan said nuclear scientists in the country have not been given the respect that they deserve. "We are facing the worst against our services to the country's nuclear programme," he added.



France's President Francois Hollande (L) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel (R) attend a remembrance ceremony to mark the centenary of the battle of Verdun, in Verdun, yesterday. The battle of Verdun, in 1916, was one of the bloodiest episodes of World War I. The offensive which lasted 300 days claimed more than 300,000 lives.

Elderly home fire kills 17 in Ukraine

AFP, Lutsk

Seventeen people died when an unlicenced home for elderly people outside the Ukrainian capital Kiev caught fire in the early hours of yesterday.

The fire tore through the two-storey building for the elderly in the village of Lutsk, located some 50 kilometres north of Kiev.

Citing preliminary information, emergency service said that 35 people were at the home when the fire broke out. Eighteen people have been rescued and five of them have been hospitalised, said the service.

In post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine and Russia outdated infrastructure is still in widespread use amid an often lax approach to fire safety.

DEADLY DRONE ATTACK IN PAKISTAN Brother of slain Taliban chief's driver sues US

AFP, Quetta

The brother of a man who was killed alongside the Taliban's slain chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour in an American drone strike in southwest Pakistan is pressing murder and terrorism charges against US officials, police said yesterday.

Mansour was travelling by car near the town of Ahmad Wal on May 21 when he was killed, a major blow to the Islamist group that has been waging a guerilla war in Afghanistan since being toppled from power in 2001.

US officials described the car's driver as a "second male combatant" but according to Pakistani security officials he was a chauffeur named Mohammad Azam who worked for the Al Habib rental company based out of Quetta, the region's main city.

His brother, Mohammad Qasim, said Azam was an innocent man who was providing for his four children and had been murdered.

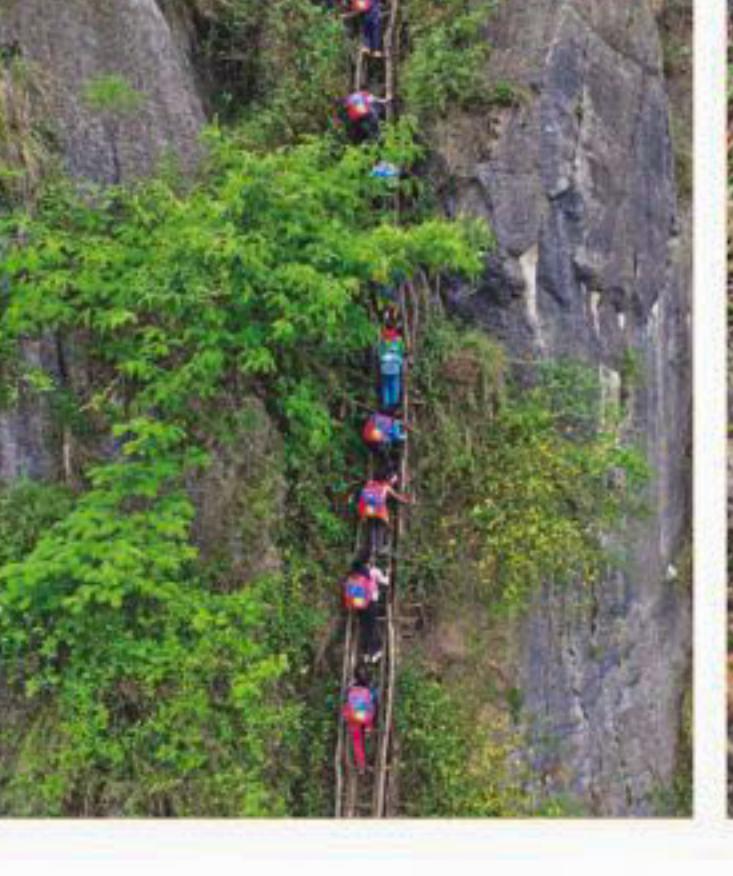
"US officials whose name I do not know accepted responsibility in the media for this incident, so I want justice and request legal action against those responsible for it," Qasim said in a police report dated May 25, a copy of which was seen by AFP.

"My brother was innocent, he was very poor and he has left behind four small children. He was the lone breadwinner in the family," he added.

"My aim is to prove the innocence of my brother as he is being portrayed as a militant, but he was just a driver," Qasim told AFP on the telephone.

Local police and administration officials on Sunday confirmed charges had been filed, but declined to comment on what steps authorities would take to pursue the case, if any.

Meanwhile a spokesman from Pakistan's Interior Ministry Sunday confirmed Mansour's killing following a DNA match with one of his relatives who had come from Afghanistan to take the body.



INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A group of children in who climb 2,500 feet (762 metres) up a mountain to get to school in China may finally be given stairs.

The 15 schoolchildren use a precarious bamboo ladder to scale a sheer cliff face once every two weeks in order to get to the village in Zhaojue county, southwest China, where they are educated.

The ladder is currently the only means of access to the village and is used by 72 families who live in the rural area.

Images of the 6-15 year-olds climb-

ing the ladder appeared online in recent days, prompting the local Liangshan prefectural government to announce plans for a set of steel stairs to be built to help the children until a safer, long-term solution can be found.

The residents are members of the Yi minority group in Sichuan province and subsist mainly by farming potatoes, walnuts and chili peppers.

A team of 50 officials from the Zhaojue county government travelled to the area on Wednesday after images of the children climbing the 17 separate ladders gained global media attention.

NEWS IN brief

South Yemen clashes kill 45: military

AFP, Aden

Fierce fighting between government forces and Shiite rebels in south Yemen yesterday claimed the lives of 25 insurgents and 20 soldiers, a military official said. More than 6,400 people have been killed in Yemen since the coalition began a campaign in March 2015 against the rebels who had occupied the capital and advanced on Hadi's refuge in the south, forcing him to flee to Riyadh.

Nepalese runner wins highest marathon

AFP, Kathmandu

Gasping for breath and clad in trekking boots, more than 150 local and foreign runners took part yesterday in the world's highest marathon in the snow-covered foothills of Mount Everest. The annual Tenzing-Hillary Everest Marathon, which began in 2003, is meant to mark the anniversary of the first summit of the peak by Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary on May 29, 1953.

Five Ukrainian soldiers killed in separatist east

AFP, Kiev

Five Ukrainian soldiers and two rebel fighters have been killed in fresh clashes between government forces and pro-Russian separatists in the country's east, the military said yesterday. It was the second biggest death toll in a single day this year for the army after the military reported on Tuesday that seven government troops had died in the

India arrest 5 over attacks on African

AFP, New Delhi

Police yesterday said they arrested five Indians accused of assaulting Africans in New Delhi, after African diplomats urged the Indian government to ensure the safety of their nationals living in the country. Delhi police said altercations and scuffles took place on Thursday night after locals became offended by Africans playing loud music and drinking alcohol in the street.



Turkey PM wins confidence vote

AFP, Ankara

Turkey's new government led by a staunch ally of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan easily passed a confidence vote in the country's parliament yesterday, the speaker announced after the vote. Binali Yildirim, who replaced Ahmet Davutoglu as prime minister last week, was backed by 315 parliamentarians while 138 voted against.

Good news for China mountain climbing school kids

The Global Times reported that government officials were in the process of assessing safer alternatives to the ladder, including potential construction of a road to connect the village, despite being disproportionately expensive for the impoverished region.

Many of China's poorest inhabitants are from long-marginalized minority groups or are farmers and herders living in the mountainous southwest, where rope bridges, aerial runways, canoes and cliff-side ladders are often used as a means of transport connection.