



An Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) and government troops march towards Mapandi bridge after 100 days of intense fighting between soldiers and Islamic States militants, who have taken over parts of Marawi city, southern Philippines, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

BENAZIR BHUTTO'S MURDER TRIAL

Pakistan court declares Musharraf a fugitive

AFP, Rawalpindi
A Pakistan court yesterday branded former military ruler Pervez Musharraf a fugitive in ex-prime minister Benazir Bhutto's murder trial, but acquitted five men accused of being involved in the 2007 assassination.
The verdicts are the first to be issued since Bhutto, the first female prime minister of a Muslim country, was killed in a gun and suicide bomb attack nearly a decade ago, sparking street violence and plunging Pakistan into months of political turmoil.
Former president and military ruler Musharraf is alleged to have been part of a broad conspiracy to have his political rival killed before elections. He has denied the allegation.
He was charged with murder, criminal conspiracy for murder, and facilitation for murder in 2013, in an unprecedented move against an ex-army chief, challenging beliefs the military is immune from prosecution.
But he has been in self-imposed exile in Dubai ever since a travel ban was lifted three years later.
The anti-terrorism court in Rawalpindi ruled he had "absconded", a court official told reporters outside, saying it had also ordered the confiscation of his property.
The court acquitted five men who had been accused of being Taliban militants involved in the conspiracy to kill Bhutto.
They were set to walk free nearly 10 years after they were first arrested, though a defence lawyer said it was not yet clear when they would be released.
However the judges found two police officers guilty of "mishandling the crime scene", the court official said.
The police officers -- Saud Aziz, who was chief of Rawalpindi police at the time, and senior officer Khurram Shahzad -- are now the only two people to have been convicted over Bhutto's assassination.
Shahzad was accused of hosing down the crime scene less than two hours after the assassination took place -- an act the United Nations described in a report into the assassination as "fundamentally inconsistent with Pakistani police practice".



US puts condition to Pak

TNN, Washington
The Trump administration notified Congress on Wednesday that it was putting \$255 million in military assistance to Pakistan into the equivalent of an escrow account that Islamabad can only access if it does more to crack down on internal terror networks launching attacks on neighboring Afghanistan.
The dueling messages sent to Pakistan -- promising aid but attaching strings if the country's counterterrorism efforts fall short -- are part of an increasingly confrontational turn in an alliance that has long been strained.
The United States has provided Pakistan more than \$33 billion in aid since 2002. But the annual funding has declined in recent years as Washington became increasingly disenchanted with Pakistan's quiet support for the Haqqani network and the Taliban, whose attacks have been responsible for the deaths of US troops in Afghanistan.
Still, US officials have long recognized that Pakistan has tried to crack down on terror groups, and plays an important role in facilitating supply shipments to the US military in Afghanistan.
Last week, in announcing his new strategy for the war in Afghanistan, President Donald Trump excoriated Pakistan.
"We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond," Trump said.

MILITARY ASSISTANCE
Aid will be released once Pak more aggressively pursues terror groups
Annual funding to Islamabad declined in recent years



He added: "We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars at the same time they are housing the very terrorists that we are fighting. But that will have to change, and that will change immediately."
State Department officials said that Trump's promised changes would bring explicit conditions on military aid. Once Pakistan more aggressively pursues the Taliban and Haqqani network, the aid will be released -- a determination to be made by Secretary of State Rex W Tillerson, officials said.
Last week, Tillerson suggested that the United States' patience with Pakistan was nearing a breaking point.
"We're going to be conditioning our support for Pakistan and our relationship with them on them delivering results in this area," Tillerson said.
Critics of US aid to Pakistan said the administration was still not being tough enough.
"I would have preferred that the money just disappeared," said C Christine Fair, an associate professor at Georgetown University. "But if they're going to do this, they should have said Pakistan can't buy strategic weapons that could be used to attack India, such as F-16s."
The \$255 million in military assistance was the largest portion of \$1.1 billion in aid authorized by Congress in 2016 that also included money for counternarcotics operations and health initiatives. If the State Department had failed to notify Congress in the next few weeks of its intention to spend the money, it would have been returned to the US Treasury.

Heavy casualties in Raqa from air strikes: UN

REUTERS, Geneva
Civilians caught up in the battle for the Syrian city of Raqa are paying an "unacceptable price" and attacking forces may be contravening international law with their intense air strikes, the top United Nations human rights official said yesterday.
A US-led coalition is seeking to oust Islamic State from Raqa, while Syrian government forces, backed by the Russian air force and Iran-backed militias are also advancing on the city.
Some 20,000 civilians are trapped in Raqa where the jihadist fighters are holding some of them as human shields, the world body says.
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein said that his office had documented 151 civilian deaths in six incidents alone in August, due to air strikes and ground-based attacks.
"Given the extremely high number of reports of civilian casualties this month and the intensity of the air strikes on Raqa, coupled with ISIL's use of civilians as human shields, I am deeply concerned that civilians -- who should be protected at all times -- are paying an unacceptable price and that forces involved in battling ISIL are losing sight of the ultimate goal of this battle," Zeid said in a statement.
"...the attacking forces may be failing to abide by the international humanitarian law principles of precautions, distinction, and proportionality," he said.
The US-led coalition has said it conducted nearly 1,100 air strikes on and near Raqa this month, up from 645 in July, the UN statement said. Russia's air force has reported carrying out 2,518 air strikes across Syria in the first three weeks of August, it added.
"Meanwhile ISIL fighters continue to prevent civilians from fleeing the area, although some manage to leave after paying large amounts of money to smugglers," Zeid said. We have reports of smugglers also being publicly executed by ISIL."
US-led warplanes on Wednesday blocked a convoy of Islamic State fighters and their families from reaching territory the group holds in eastern Syria and struck some of their comrades travelling to meet them, a coalition spokesman said.

WAR IN SYRIA
Civilians pay 'unacceptable price': UN rights boss
Attacking forces 'losing sight of ultimate goal of this battle'

US has 11,000 troops in Afghanistan

Says Pentagon
AFP, Washington
The Pentagon sharply raised its estimate of the number of US troops currently in Afghanistan Wednesday, ahead of a decision on adding thousands more under President Donald Trump's new strategy for the war-ridden country.
Pentagon Joint Staff Director Lieutenant General Kenneth McKenzie said a comprehensive review showed there were approximately 11,000 uniformed US servicemen and women in Afghanistan, compared to the 8,400 number used since last year.
The new count, which includes temporary and covert units as well as regular forces, was made to establish the basis for an increase in troops -- possibly by around 4,000 -- under Trump's revised strategy to better support Afghan troops in the fight against the Taliban.
But McKenzie declined to say how many more troops would be added.
Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis "still hasn't made that decision," he said, adding: "No troops have started to flow... no deployment orders have been issued."
McKenzie said that after president Barack Obama set a ceiling of 8,400 troops for the country last July, military commanders had been hampered in their ability to deploy full units, leading to "unintended consequences".
Meanwhile, 13 civilians from the same family were killed and another 15 wounded in a US air strike on Taliban fighters in eastern Afghanistan, Afghan authorities said yesterday.
US Forces-Afghanistan said it has launched an investigation into the incident which an Afghan official said also killed more than a dozen insurgents hiding in a house in Dasht-e-Bari village in volatile Logar province near Kabul on Wednesday.

NEWS IN brief

China's 19th Party congress on Oct 18
AFP, Beijing
China will convene its 19th Party Congress on October 18, state media said yesterday, a key meeting held every five years where President Xi Jinping is expected to receive a second term as the ruling Communist Party's top leader.
Palestinian radio station shut down
AFP, Hebron
Israeli forces have shut down a Palestinian radio station in the occupied West Bank for six months, the army and sources at the station said yesterday. Al-Hurria station in southern West Bank city of Hebron was closed "for content inciting violence and encouraging terrorism," an army spokeswoman said.

Lanka emerging as cocaine transit hub

REUTERS, Colombo
International cocaine smugglers are increasingly turning to Sri Lanka as a transit hub in Asia, authorities say, after they made a series of seizures of the drug, some smuggled in containers of sugar from Brazil.
Sri Lankan customs have seized six shipments of high-purity South American cocaine in 14 months, including Asia's largest-ever haul of the drug in December, at its main port.
"Sri Lanka is becoming a hub for cocaine as it is a risk-free location with less legal restrictions," a top police official who is aware of investigations into the smuggling told Reuters this week.
"We don't believe that these containers came here mistakenly. Why are these cocaine containers not going to any other country which imports Brazil sugar?"
About 1,770 kg, or \$140 million worth of cocaine, had been seized in Sri Lanka, of which 840 kg was found in five sugar shipments from Brazil.
A 928 kg seizure -- the largest cocaine haul in Asia -- was found in a container of timber on a Colombian ship bound for India.
Police could not say if Sri Lanka was the final destination for any of the cocaine but a government minister said he believed all of the drugs were bound for elsewhere.
"Sri Lanka is a transit point for mass-scale drug dealers," Minister of Law and Order Sagala Ratnayaka told Reuters.



Hundreds of immigration advocates and supporters attend a rally and march to Trump Tower in support of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that protects immigrant children from deportation on Wednesday in New York City. PHOTO: AFP

Conflicts in ME boost Bulgarian arms exports

AFP, Sofia
Conflicts in the Middle East boosted Bulgaria's arms exports by almost 60 percent in 2016 to record levels not seen since the end of communism, official data showed yesterday. Bulgaria exported over 1.0 billion euros' worth of arms in 2016.
10 civilians killed in joint Somali-US raid
REUTERS, Mogadishu
Somali government officials said yesterday that 10 men and boys killed in a joint US-Somali raid were civilians and that blood money will be paid to the families. US Africa Command had confirmed the presence of US troops in the raid, carried out under expanded powers granted to US troops.

2m children shut out of schools

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK
Severe flooding and landslides in Bangladesh, Nepal and India have prevented over 1.8 million children from attending schools across the region.
At least 1,200 people have been killed in South Asia's worst flooding in years, with more than 40 million affected.
Thousands of schools are being used as emergency evacuation shelters and at least 18,000 have been damaged or destroyed by the floods, which is putting children's education and long-term well-being at risk, Save the Children has warned.
Hundreds of thousands of children could fall permanently out of the school system if education is not prioritised in relief efforts.
"We haven't seen flooding on this scale in years and it's putting the long-term education of an enormous number of children at great risk," said Rafay Hussein, Save the Children's General Manager in India's Bihar state.
"From our experience, the importance of education is often undervalued in humanitarian crises and we simply cannot let this happen again. We cannot go backwards.
"We know that the longer children are out of school following a disaster like this the less likely it is that they'll ever return."

The death toll is continuing to rise, alongside concerns over disease and food insecurity.
India's coastal city of Mumbai is the latest to be hit by torrential monsoon rains and flooding, with at least 13 people killed after a building collapsed downtown.
The poorest areas of Nepal have been badly hit, with more than 210,000 homes destroyed, exploitation.

DEVASTATING SOUTH ASIA FLOODS
At least 18,000 schools damaged or destroyed
More than 40m people affected by flooding



"School is the absolute best place for children to be, acting as a protection mechanism against things like child labour, early marriage and child trafficking, which can occur in times of emergencies like floods, when poor communities are pushed to the brink," said Mark Pierce, Save the Children's country director in Bangladesh.
"School also supports children's emotional recovery, providing a sense of normality and routine and a place to be with their peers."
On August 14, Elephants helped rescue hundreds of tourists from a flooded jungle safari park in Nepal, officials said.
The Rapti River overflowed its banks in Sauraha, 80 km (50 miles) south of the capital, Kathmandu, inundating hotels and restaurants and leaving some 600 tourists stranded.
Sauraha, on the fringe of Chitwan National Park, is home to 605 rhinoceroses and is popular with foreign tourists, including Indian and Chinese visitors, mainly for rhino watching and elephant rides.
"Some 300 guests were rescued on elephant backs and tractor trailers to (nearby) Bharatpur yesterday and the rest will be taken to safer places today," Suman Ghimire, head of a group of Sauraha hotel owners, said.

381 new species found in Amazon

AFP, Sao Paulo
Researchers have found 381 new species in the Amazon rainforest, the World Wildlife Fund announced Wednesday, warning that the discoveries were all in areas threatened by human activity.
The report by the WWF and Brazil's Mamiraua Institute, released in Sao Paulo, listed 216 previously unknown plants, 93 fish, 32 amphibians, 19 reptiles, one bird and 20 mammals, two of them fossils.
A new species is discovered in the Amazon area, spread over nine South American countries, every two days on average.
This is the third report in a series, listing 2,000 new species over the last 17 years. However, the good news comes with a worrying trend, the WWF said.
"All the species that were discovered, all 381, are in areas where humankind is destroying the Amazon. This is very important to us, because it links the fact that our economic activities are causing species to go extinct before we even know about them," Ricardo Mello, WWF Brazil Amazon program coordinator, said.
"We have to show this and act so that economic activity is more transparent," he said.