

International

Taleban shadow governors killed as air strikes step up

Afghan Taleban rescind ban on Red Cross

KABUL: Afghan security forces, backed by US air strikes, killed two of the movement's shadow provincial governors yesterday, as fighting stepped up in the wake of the collapse of talks aimed at ending the conflict, officials said. The operations, launched on Saturday night, were aimed at foiling attacks planned by the Taleban on Afghan forces, said a senior security official in the capital Kabul, adding that clashes have escalated following the collapse of diplomatic talks between the United States and the Taleban.

The defense ministry in a statement said at least 85 Taleban fighters were killed in a joint ground and air operation in southern Paktika province on Saturday night. The figure was rejected by the Taleban, who said seven fighters had been killed and 11 wounded while casualties among the security forces were over 20. "The rest of the claims are baseless," the movement's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said.

Clashes between the hardline insurgent group and Afghan forces intensified in northern Samangan province on Saturday where the Taleban's shadow provincial governor, Mawlawi Nooruddin, was killed along with four fighters in an air strike in Dara-e-Sooif Payeen district, local officials said. The Taleban, who have validated a parallel provincial governance structure, separate from the Afghan government, denied the governor had been killed.

"He (Nooruddin) is alive," said Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taleban spokesman said in a statement. In a separate incident, Mullah Sayed Azim, a Taleban shadow governor for Anar Dara district in western Farah was killed in a joint Afghan and foreign force raid. "Sayed Azim was killed along with 34 other insurgents in Anar Dara," said Mohibullah Mohib, a spokesman for Farah provincial police.

Senior security officials in Kabul said several joint

operations will be launched against Taleban and Islamic State fighters to prevent attacks on Afghan forces and civilians ahead of the presidential polls on Sept. 28. Fighting picked up in several parts of Afghanistan last week after US President Donald Trump's abrupt cancellation of talks with the Taleban aimed at withdrawing US troops and opening the way to end to 18 year-long war in Afghanistan. Last week the Taleban killed four Afghan special force members in a car bomb blast.

The Taleban, who now control the most territory they have had since 2001, are demanding the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan. The US forces, which provide all-important air support to Afghan troops, have entered into an intense offensive mode after the collapse of talks, said a senior security official. "The determination to wipe out Taleban safe havens has gained a fresh momentum," he said on conditions of anonymity, adding that the clashes will end once the Taleban declares a ceasefire. Some 14,000 US troops remain in Afghanistan, training and advising Afghan forces as part of the NATO-led Resolute Support mission and conducting counterinsurgency operations.

Ban on Red Cross

The Afghan Taleban rescinded a months-long ban on the International Committee for Red Cross (ICRC) working in areas under their control yesterday and restored security guarantees for those working for the organization. The militants and the ICRC "consented to following the old agreement on top of new promises in humanitarian aid leading to the Islamic Emirate granting ICRC permission of resuming their activities," said Taleban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid in a statement.

Taleban fighters were instructed to "pave the way for ICRC activities and be mindful of security to this com-



KABUL: In this file photo Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers stand guard as others inspect the site of a suicide car bomb attack near a base of elite Afghan special forces in Char Asiab district, south of the capital Kabul. — AFP

mittee's workers and equipment," it added. "We welcome the acknowledgment of our humanitarian principles and renewal of security guarantees to enable us (to) work in #Afghanistan in favour of people affected by the armed conflict," Schaefer Juan-Pedro, head of ICRC in Kabul said on Twitter. In April the insurgents banned both the ICRC and World Health Organization (WHO) from carrying out relief activities in areas under

their control and revoked security guarantees. The Taleban did not mention the WHO in the announcement, which it said came following talks with ICRC in Doha. In August last year, the Taleban temporarily withdrew safety guarantees for the ICRC, accusing the international group of failing to meet its mission obligations to monitor detention conditions in Afghan jails and provide medical aid to Taleban prisoners. — Agencies

Protests mount in Kashmir clampdown

SRINAGAR: Kashmir has seen an average of nearly 20 protests per day against Indian rule over the last six weeks despite a security lockdown to quell unrest, a senior government source told AFP. Tensions remain high in the disputed Himalayan region after New Delhi's controversial decision last month to revoke the territory's decades old semi-autonomous status. Despite a curfew, movement restrictions and the severe curtailment of internet and mobile phone services, public demonstrations against India-mostly in the largest city Srinagar-have been constant, the source told AFP late Saturday.

Altogether there have been 722 protests since August 5, with Baramulla district in the northwest and Pulwama in the south the biggest hotspots after Srinagar, the source said. Since that date, nearly 200 civilians and 415 security force members have been hurt, according to the source. Ninety-five of the civilians were injured in the last two weeks, the official said. So far more than 4,100 people-including 170 local political leaders-have been detained across the valley, with 3,000 released in the past two weeks, the official said. It was unclear whether any politicians



LAHORE: Pakistani Barelvi organisation 'Sunni Tehreek' members burn an effigy of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a protest in Lahore. — AFP

were among those released.

Indian authorities have so far insisted that outbreaks of violence have been minimal, and that only five civilians have died since the clampdown started. The relatives of four of those killed told AFP they believed the security forces were responsible for their deaths. The latest updates came as police said Thursday that three men suspected of belonging to a Pakistan-based militant organization were arrested while transporting weapons and ammuni-

tion towards Indian Kashmir.

Nuclear-armed neighbors India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir, which was split between the two countries in 1947. India deployed extra troops ahead of the August 5 decision to reinforce some 500,000 soldiers already stationed in the region, one of the most militarized places on the planet. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan on Friday promised to raise the decision to strip Indian Kashmir of its autonomy at the upcoming UN General Assembly session. —AFP

Air pollution in Borneo leads to school closures

PALANGKA RAYA: Schools in two cities in the Indonesian part of Borneo island will be closed for a week after smoke from forest fires caused air quality to hit "dangerous" levels, a local government official said yesterday. Indonesia and neighboring countries in Southeast Asia are regularly hit by smoke from slash-and-burn clearances of forests for farms and palm oil plantations, but conditions this year have been the worst since 2015 due to an El Nino weather pattern causing an extended dry spell.

The air pollution index in Palangka Raya, the capital of Borneo's Central Kalimantan province, hit 500, or "dangerous", yesterday, data from Indonesia's Environment and Forestry Ministry showed. Any reading above 100 is considered "unhealthy". An official said yesterday that schools in Palangka Raya and another city, Sampit, would be shut next week, in line with instructions circulated by Central Kalimantan's governor on Friday. "From our observation, the smoke is very thick in Palangka Raya and Sampit," Slamet Winaryo, the head of Central Kalimantan's education agency, said by telephone.

"We have decided to give one week off from Monday to Saturday for the students in both locations," he said. He did not say how many pupils or schools would be affected. Winaryo said other schools in Central Kalimantan would start half an hour later, at 0730 local time. Schools have also been advised to cut the duration for each class into 30-minute periods. Indonesia's environment



RIAUI, Indonesia: This aerial picture shows a bridge as smoke and haze choking the air over Pekanbaru. —AFP

minister said on Friday some forest fires in its territory had started on land used by subsidiaries of Malaysian companies, as the neighbours traded blame for blazes that have spread haze across the region.

A Reuters photographer in Palangka Raya said visibility was down to around 50 meters. Air Visual - an independent online air quality index (AQI) monitor - showed the city's air quality has been "hazardous" since Friday. Indonesian authorities have urged Central Kalimantan residents to refrain from outdoor activities or to wear a mask due to the severe

pollution.

"There are many hotspots in Kalimantan, those are high category hotspots," Agus Wibowo, the country's disaster mitigation agency (BNPB) spokesman, said by text message. The agency has deployed eight helicopters and 1,512 personnel to extinguish fire across 44,769 hectares of land in Central Kalimantan since May. Meanwhile, schools in West Kalimantan, which were closed due to deteriorating air condition from September 12 to September 14, will reopen today. — Reuters

12 dead, dozens missing in India boat accident

NEW DELHI: At least 12 people drowned and dozens were missing after a tour boat capsized in an Indian river yesterday, police and local media reports said, as rescuers searched frantically for survivors. The Royal Vashishta vessel was carrying 63 people, most of them tourists, to a picnic spot near Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh state in

southeast India at the time of the accident. Rescue teams including divers and a helicopter were scouring the river, a senior police official said.

Some 12 bodies had been found and 17 people rescued, police told the Press Trust of India. The Godavari river has been flowing fast for a week, local media said, adding that the boat was run by the state government. Overcrowding and poor safety checks often cause boat accidents in India, especially during the annual monsoon rains when rivers are swollen. Last week a dozen people died in central Bhopal after two boats capsized during a ceremony to immerse an idol of Hindu god Ganesha into a river. —AFP

Menstruation and myths: Overcoming Pakistan's taboo

BOONI, Pakistan: Bent over her hand-crank sewing machine, Hajra Bibi carefully stitches sanitary pads for the women of her mountainous village in northwestern Pakistan, one of many rural areas in the deeply conservative country where periods are still taboo. "I am responding to a crisis," said the 35-year-old mother, sitting in front of her small, doily-covered work table in the village of Booni, close to the Afghan border.

"Before, Booni's women had no idea what sanitary towels were," she explained. Less than a fifth of women use sanitary pads in Pakistan, local charities estimate. Traditionally women have used rags and cloth to soak up their menstrual blood, but the stigma around periods and a lack of reproductive education means hygiene standards are poor and many contracted infections.

As with other areas of rural Pakistan, menstruating women were viewed as unclean and limited in what they were able to do. Bibi was given training to make the disposable sanitary pads, made of cotton, plastic, and cloth, by the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) — an NGO working with Unicef-in a scheme that aims to change attitudes to

women's health. She took up the work to support her family because her husband is disabled and they have little income. Each pad takes around 20 minutes to make and is sold for 20 rupees. Initially her work disturbed the local community. "At first, people were asking me why I was doing this, some were insulting me," Bibi recalled. But now, "girls in the village can talk about their periods," she said proudly, adding that she was fighting "for the basic needs of women".

Infection and education

In Pakistan, Unicef has warned that in some cases information about menstruation has deliberately been withheld from women as a "means of protecting their chastity". "This in turn negatively impacts their physical and emotional health," it said in a 2018 report. Historically, the women of Booni have used cloth, but according to Bushra Ansari of AKRSP the taboo surrounding periods meant many were ashamed to dry them outside, unaware that damp cloths are a breeding ground for bacteria.

In addition, female family members often shared the same menstrual rags, increasing the risk of contracting urinary and reproductive tract infections, explained Wassaf Sayed Kakakhail, a doctor in the region. "If there are three girls in the same family, they all use the same pieces of fabric," she said, adding many women are told not to wash during their period. There is no sex-education in schools and the topic is rarely discussed-even between women-at homes in northern Pakistan, a particularly conservative part of the country. —AFP



BOONI, Pakistan: In this picture Pakistani woman Hajra Bibi makes a sanitary pad with a sewing machine at her home in Booni village in Chitral. — AFP