

NIGERIA SUICIDE ATTACKS DEATH TOLL REACHES 45

KANO: Two female suicide bombers on Friday killed 45 people and wounded 33 others when they detonated their explosives in a crowded market in Nigeria's restive northeast, the emergency service said the army had earlier put the death toll at 30. "From our updated records we have 45 dead and 33 injured in the twin suicide bomb explosions in Madagali," said Sa'ad Bello of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) in Adamawa state.

While there was no immediate claim of responsibility, the blasts bore all the hallmarks of Boko Haram, which regularly uses women and young girls to carry out suicide attacks in its seven-year

insurgent campaign in the troubled region. Military spokesman Badare Akintoye had earlier said "at least 30 people have been killed in the suicide blasts carried out by two female suicide bombers in the market." A local government official and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) confirmed the attack.

"The two bombers who (were) disguised as customers, detonated their suicide belts at the section of the market selling grains and second-hand clothing," said Yusuf Muhammad, the chairman of Madagali local government. The attack on Madagali, which was recaptured by Nigerian forces from Boko Haram

jihads in 2015, was the third time the town has been targeted since December last year when two female suicide bombers killed scores. Market trader Habu Ahmad said Friday's blasts happened around 9:30 am (0830 GMT). "It was dead bodies and wounded people in the midst of blood, spilt grain and abandoned personal effects," he said.

'Under control'

Ibrahim Abdulkadir, NEMA spokesman for the northeast, said rescue teams had been deployed to the scene. He said security agents had cordoned off the scene of the explosions. Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari con-

demned the attack in a statement on Friday, vowing to put "an end to this senseless loss of innocent lives."

"This latest attack is obviously an act of desperation, but the Nigerian military will neither be distracted nor relent," he said. He urged Nigerians to be more vigilant and immediately report any suspicious activity to the nearest security agents. "The battle against terrorism is a joint effort involving all citizens, both government and governed. Together, Nigerians can and will defeat the evil that is Boko Haram," he added.

Buhari had told a security conference in Senegal on Wednesday that the situation in the region was "under control".

Boko Haram is seeking to impose a hardline Islamic legal system on Nigeria's mainly-Muslim north. Its campaign of violence has killed at least 20,000 people and displaced some 2.6 million since 2009.

Nigeria's military campaign against the jihadists is increasingly bogged down as it confronts suicide attacks, looting and indiscriminate slaughter. The United Nations has warned that the affected region faces the "largest crisis in Africa". The UN estimates that 14 million people will need outside help in 2017 because of the ongoing violence, particularly in Borno State, the epicentre of the rebellion. — AFP



HYDERABAD: In this photograph taken on December 9, 2016, Indian rescue workers dig through the rubble of a collapsed building. — AFP

BUILDING COLLAPSE IN INDIA KILLS NINE

NEW DELHI: Nine people died after an under-construction building collapsed in southern India but a four-year-old boy and his mother were pulled alive from the rubble, police said yesterday. The seven-storey building where laborers and their families lived in the basement came crashing down late Thursday in Hyderabad, the state capital of Telangana.

"We can confirm that the toll has gone up to nine. Rescue workers had managed to pull out a mother and her child alive yesterday (Friday)," a senior police officer told AFP. "The debris is still being removed," he said, requesting anonymity. Emergency workers were using mechanical diggers and other equipment to remove mangled

slabs of concrete and steel at the site, TV footage showed.

The mother and her child were undergoing emergency treatment at a hospital while three more people remained unaccounted for, the officer added. The state government has promised tough action against the building owner for alleged violation of construction rules as well as civic officials for dereliction of duty, the Press Trust of India news agency reported. Deadly accidents at building sites are relatively common in India and are often blamed on a lack of safety measures. In July, nine laborers fell to their death from an under-construction residential tower in Mumbai after a concrete slab collapsed. — AFP

TALEBAN FIGHTER CONTESTS ATTACK CONVICTION, SEEKING IMMUNITY

RICHMOND: The prosecution of a former Russian military officer accused of leading a Taliban attack on American forces is a radical departure from the US's long practice of treating fighters as enemy combatants instead of criminals, the man's attorney argued Friday. At issue in Irek Hamidullin's appeal is whether the man should have been brought to trial in a civilian court in the first place.

His attorneys argue that he qualifies as a lawful combatant and is therefore exempt from criminal prosecution. "The bottom line is that Mr. Hamidullin is a soldier, not a criminal," federal public defender Jeremy Kamens told a three-judge panel of the 4th US Circuit Court of Appeals.

The Russian military veteran who was a part of the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani Network was sentenced to life in prison last year on charges including material support to terrorism for the 2009 attack. Hamidullin, who was captured after being shot and wounded, was the lone survivor among about 30 insurgents. The coalition forces sustained no casualties.

His case is one of only two in the last 15 years in which a court considered whether a Taliban fighter enjoyed combatant immunity. The judge in the other case sided with the government. The extraordinary nature of the case was not lost on the judges on Friday. "There's a lot of stake here," Judge Robert B King remarked.

Under the Geneva Convention, fighters are granted prisoner of war status and shielded from criminal prosecution if they have a leadership hierarchy, a distinctive uniform or insignia, carry arms openly and adhere to the laws and customs of war. Judge King and appeared skeptical of prosecutors' argument that Hamidullin did not meet any of those requirements, noting that the man was the openly carrying an

AK-47 at the time of the attack and was considered to be commander of the group.

Exempt from prosecution

"That sounds like an organization," King said. The judges also questioned whether Hamidullin's prosecution would open the door to more fighters being prosecuted in US courts. "So Congress wants Taliban fighters brought to the US and tried in court?" Judge Andre M Davis asked.

Prosecutors contend that the Taliban and its affiliated groups aren't exempt from prosecution because, among other things, the war in Afghanistan was not an international conflict in 2009. Assistant US Attorney Richard Cooke told the panel that it doesn't matter whether Hamidullin was openly carrying arms or wearing a uniform during the attack because he's part of a group that regularly violates the laws and customs of war by intentionally targeting civilians and employing suicide bombers. "This is a pretty straightforward case at the end of the day," Cooke said.

Kamens told the court that treating Hamidullin as a prisoner of war would cost the government "almost nothing" because it would be entitled to keep him in custody for the duration of the conflict in Afghanistan. He said that ruling in Hamidullin's favor would ultimately benefit US soldiers. "Our own soldiers should not be subject to domestic criminal law like Hamidullin," Kamens said.

Hamidullin's attorneys want the appeals court to at least grant a new trial and allow the man to present a defense that he shouldn't be held criminally liable because he was acting under the direction of the Taliban. The district court judge barred him from presenting such a defense at trial. A decision is expected in the coming weeks. — AP

IT'LL BE TRUMP'S WAR SOON: AFGHAN'S FUTURE IS CLOUDY

TWO PRESIDENTS LATER, REGION STILL MUDDLED IN STRIFE

KABUL: Afghanistan has fallen so far from Americans' consciousness that some may have forgotten it's called the forgotten war. It also is America's longest war. Now in its 16th year and showing little sign of ending, it will soon be the responsibility of Donald Trump, two presidents removed from the October 2001 invasion. During the presidential campaign, neither Trump nor Democrat Hillary Clinton offered new ideas for breaking the battlefield stalemate. They hardly mentioned the country, let alone a strategy.

And yet, the war President George W Bush began as America's response to 9/11 grinds on as nearly 10,000 US troops train and advise the Afghan army and police, hopeful that at some point the Afghans can stand on their own against the Taliban - or better, that peace talks will end the insurgency. A look at the war Trump is inheriting, what US troops are doing and why the outlook is so clouded:

The US mission

While President Barack Obama was a long-time critic of the Iraq war, he always cast the Afghanistan fight as vital. Shortly after taking office in 2009, Obama looked to fix what he saw as US failures in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He tripled troop levels in Afghanistan, but the surge did not force the Taliban to the negotiating table. Pakistan remains a sanctuary for the Taliban.

In December 2014, the US ended its combat role in Afghanistan, but there will be at least 8,400 troops there when Trump takes office. American troops and their coalition partners perform two tasks: Operation Resolute Support is to train and advise Afghan forces fighting the Taliban. Operation Freedom's Sentinel is to hunt down and kill Al-Qaeda militants, as well as those affiliated with the Islamic State and other groups using the country as a hideout and potential launching pad for

attacks. "The interests we are pursuing here are clear and enduring," Defense Secretary Ash Carter said during a visit Friday. He cited the goals of preventing another 9/11-type attack on America and helping Afghanistan attain enough stability to remain a long-term security partner.

The US performs its counterterrorism work in Afghanistan in two ways. First, it goes after Al-Qaeda and Islamic State operatives as a US-only mission. Gen. John Nicholson, the top US commander in the country, said last week that US special operations forces have conducted 350 such missions in 2016, about one per day on average, killing or capturing nearly 50 leaders and other members of Al-Qaeda.

Secondly, US forces join Afghan special forces in hunting Islamic State fighters; these operations have killed the top 12 IS leaders in Afghanistan, Nicholson said. He said that of the 98 militant groups designated by the US as terrorist organizations, 20 are in Afghanistan, the world's highest concentration. That alone says much about the inconclusive - some would say failed - outcome of Obama administration's efforts. Nicholson said Friday the remnants of Al-Qaeda, the group whose 9/11 attacks were the reason the US invaded, still intend to attack America.

The outlook

Nicholson and many US generals who preceded him see reason for hope, pointing to Afghanistan's modest progress against corruption and expanded opportunities for women. He said he is confident the Afghan army, which suffered heavy losses in 2016, will continue to improve. "It was a tough year," he said. "They were tested. They prevailed."

His predecessor, retired Gen. John Campbell, says the Afghans deserve continued support. "The Afghan government is now taking on the Taliban more so than ever before,"

he said Friday in an email exchange. Some analysts, however, worry that the Obama administration missed opportunities to improve security and strengthen the government.

Frederick W Kagan, a military historian and director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, says security has deteriorated despite US efforts to build up the army and police. "If that's not good," he said of Afghan security, "nothing else matters. And it's not good." Kagan says Obama is leaving his successor a worrisome situation. "We're sliding toward the collapse of this government and potentially a renewal of the civil war," he said.

Trump's war

Trump will not have an easy time disentangling the US military from Afghanistan, short of an unlikely decision to simply walk away. He has said little about the country, but has called broadly for an end to "nation-building" efforts. Michael Flynn, the retired Army lieutenant general who will be Trump's national security adviser, sees Afghanistan as part of a broader war that the US must fight for generations.

"We defeated Al-Qaeda and the Iranians in Iraq, and the Taliban and their allies in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, they kept fighting and we went away," he wrote in his 2016 book, "Field of Fight."

"Let's face it: Right now we're losing, and I'm talking about a very big war, not just Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. We're in a world war against a messianic mass movement of evil people, most of them inspired by a totalitarian ideology: radical Islam."

Trump's choice to lead the Pentagon, retired Marine Gen James Mattis, is a veteran of combat in Afghanistan. He has written that the US devotes too few resources, guided by too little strategic clarity, to Afghanistan. How that translates into action by the next White House is unclear. — AP



KABUL: In this Monday, Dec 5, 2016 photo, Afghan women walk on a street. — AP

TIBETAN SELF-IMMOLATES IN CHINA: RIGHTS GROUP

BEIJING: A man has self-immolated in protest against China's presence in Tibet while calling for the return of the Dalai Lama, a rights group said yesterday, the first Tibetan to set himself on fire since March. Horrifying video footage online showed the man, aged in his thirties and named by The International Campaign for Tibet as Tashi Rabten, walking down the road in northwest China's Maqu region with his entire body engulfed in flames while a passerby recited prayers.

According to the Tibetan government in exile based in India, Rabten is the 145th Tibetan to self-immolate since 2009. Local authorities, who collected his charred remains, could not be reached for comment. Rabten's wife, two of his

children and several other family members were placed in detention by local police after they went to claim the body, according to rights group Free Tibet.

"Having lost a father and a husband, Tashi Rabten's family now find themselves in detention. The cruelty of this system knows no bounds," Free Tibet said in a statement. "The only crime they have committed is to be the family of someone who has embarrassed China by once again reminding the world that their occupation and these human rights abuses cause Tibetans real pain. And sometimes this pain pushes Tibetans to make the ultimate sacrifice," it added. Beijing says its troops "peacefully liberated"

Tibet in 1951, but many Tibetans accuse the central government of religious repression and eroding their culture.

Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama fled into exile after a failed uprising in 1959. Tibetan monks within China have reported a campaign of government intimidation targeting the family and friends of those who set themselves on fire. According to The International Campaign for Tibet, Tashi Rabten, a former monk, had a cousin who self-immolated in the exact same street in 2012. In March this year two Tibetans, a monk in China and a teenager in India, set themselves on fire to protest Beijing's control of the Himalayan region. — AFP



RICHMOND: This Nov 7, 2014, artist rendering shows, Irek Hamidullin, front center, his attorney Robert Wagner, front left, and interpreter Ihab Samra, front right, as Judge Henry Hudson, left, listens in Federal Court. — AP