

AFGHAN TROOPS PULL OUT OF STRATEGIC HELMAND DISTRICT

LASHKAR GAH, Afghanistan: Afghan forces have pulled out of bases in Musa Qala, a strategic district of the southern province of Helmand, after months of heavy fighting with Taliban insurgents, officials said yesterday.

Helmand, a traditional heartland of the Taliban and one of the world's biggest centres of opium production, has been threatened for months and the United States recently sent hundreds of soldiers to the province to bolster its defense. The commander of the Afghan army's 215th corps, Mohammad Moeen Faqir, said troops had been ordered to pull back from Roshan Tower, their main

base in Musa Qala, as well as other checkpoints to reinforce Gereshek, straddling the main Highway One which links Kabul with the south and west.

"Their presence in the area did not mean anything," he said. "We will use them in battle with enemies in other parts of Helmand province."

Fierce fighting has raged in Musa Qala and other parts of Helmand for months and the Taliban overran the district in August last year before they were driven back by Afghan forces backed by US airstrikes. Musa Qala itself is a dry and sparsely inhabited district that British and American troops fought hard to

control between 2006 and 2008 but its loss could bring further losses elsewhere, including Sangin where government forces have been clinging on.

"Now that the government has withdrawn its forces from this district, we will see Kajaki, Gereshek and Sangin collapsing very soon," said deputy provincial council member Abdul Majid Akhundzada. The Taliban said in a statement it had captured armored personnel carriers, bulldozers and other equipment abandoned in Roshan Tower and nine other checkpoints. The withdrawal prompted speculation among local officials that the government had reached

an arrangement with the Taliban but Abdul Jabar Qahraman, presidential envoy for security affairs in Helmand, denied any such pact. "There wasn't any deal," he said. "We learnt that there was no need to continue the fight in that area." No comment was immediately available from the ministry of defense in Kabul. The outgoing commander of international forces, Gen. John Campbell, recently sent hundreds of American troops to Helmand, where they assist and train Afghan forces but do not fight. A spokesman for NATO's Resolute Support mission in Kabul said its aim remained to train, advise and

assist and referred questions on Afghan troop movements to the defense ministry. US officials estimate the Taliban dominates or threatens almost a third of the country and has full control over at least four districts. Although it briefly took the northern city of Kunduz last year, it does not control any provincial capitals.

Although Helmand has been one of the provinces most at risk, the Taliban have been pushing forward across the country, putting severe strain on government troops, fighting alone since international forces ended most combat operations in 2014. — Reuters

PAKISTAN TROOPS KILL FIVE MILITANTS

ISLAMABAD: Pakistani security forces yesterday killed at least five militants in a gunfight in a restive northwestern tribal district bordering Afghanistan, the military said. Troops encountered the militants near Ghalanai, the main town of Mohmand, one of the seven tribal border districts which have been home to Al-Qaeda and Taliban-led militants.

"Five terrorists were killed by security forces in Mohmand early morning today," a military statement said. Troops engaged the militants as they were planning a "terrorist activity", it said without elaborating, adding that the bodies were handed over to the local administration. The clash comes after Taliban militants killed at least nine policemen in two almost simultaneous attacks in Mohmand on Wednesday. They killed seven police in an ambush on a checkpoint in Pandiyali area of Mohmand and shot dead two more who were guarding a solar-powered tube well in Michni area. Pakistan's army stepped up its offensive in the region after the Taliban's massacre of 153 people, mostly children, in Peshawar in December 2014, and killed or pushed hundreds of militants to Afghanistan.

Overall, levels of militant-linked violence have dropped dramatically, with 2015 seeing the fewest deaths among civilians and security forces since 2007 — the year the Pakistani Taliban umbrella group was formed. But the threat posed by the Taliban remains, particularly in the northwest.

Last month Taliban gunmen stormed a university in the northwestern town of Charsadda, killing 21 people in a chilling reminder of their ongoing ability to carry out occasional high-profile and

brazen attacks. Pakistan's Islamist insurgency began after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which led to a spillover of militants across the border and a surge in recruitment for Pakistani extremist groups.

School blown up

Militants blew up part of a newly-constructed government school in Pakistan's South Waziristan region late Friday night, a spokesman for a wing of the Pakistani Taliban said yesterday, the latest in a string of attacks on educational institutions. No one was hurt in the blast in Pakistan's restive tribal belt, but 18 labourers working on the site were abducted, said Azam Tariq, a spokesman for an arm of the Pakistani Taliban known as the "Sajna" group, which claimed responsibility for the attack. He said the workers were released a short time later. "We have blown up the school because it was a government installation," said Tariq, warning the group would continue to attack government targets.

Twenty people were killed and dozens wounded last month when militants launched an attack on Bacha Khan University in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, a little more than a year after Taliban gunmen massacred 134 students at a military school in nearby Peshawar. The Peshawar school attack was seen as having hardened Pakistan's resolve to fight militants along its border with Afghanistan. Officials in South Waziristan said the girls' wing of the school in the Tehsil Tiarza area was damaged in Friday's blast, as well as some heavy machinery being used for ongoing construction at the site. — Agencies



ROHTAK: Indian Army and security personnel patrol following fatal caste protests in Rohtak yesterday. — AFP

LOCKDOWN IN NORTH INDIA STATE AS VIOLENCE FLARES

AT LEAST ONE KILLED IN CASTE PROTESTS IN HARYANA

NEW DELHI: Indian authorities issued shoot-on-sight orders and deployed thousands of troops in a northern state neighboring New Delhi yesterday, after escalating caste protests left at least one dead, officials said.

Television images showed mobs wielding sticks rampaging through the streets in northern Haryana state, setting fire to a local government minister's house and railway stations, damaging train tracks and blocking two key highways. A week-long protest by the state's dominant Jat caste, who are demanding quotas for government jobs and in education, turned violent Friday as police fired on protesters with local reports saying four had died.

Jats, a comparatively affluent caste group, want the same special allowances that are afforded to lower castes facing societal discrimination, but other groups oppose the call.

Haryana chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar appealed for calm yesterday afternoon and urged people not to damage public property. "I appeal to the people especially the youth to stop the protests. Nothing will be gained by destroying property," Khattar said in a televised interview.

In Rohtak district, the centre of the protests, a mob defied the security clampdown and set fire

to a police station, a petrol pump, a community hall and shops, police told AFP.

"It was a 3,000-strong mob with axes, iron rods and sticks. We had to run for safety," Rajender Singh, a local police official told AFP. With protests spreading across the state, more than 5,000 army and paramilitary troops patrolled the streets to impose a round-the-clock curfew in eight districts.

The army was forced to use helicopters to reach parts of the state after protesters blocked two highways connecting four northern states with the capital.

"One person is confirmed dead and five are critical. Eighty-eight others are injured," Yash Pal Singal, Haryana police chief told reporters. Rakesh Gupta, director of the main government hospital in Rohtak, also told AFP he was aware of only one death from the violence.

Jat leaders defiant

Protesters damaged railway tracks and started fires at stations leading 600 trains to be cancelled since Friday, a spokesman for Indian Railways said. "Three rail stations were burnt down and several kilometres of track have been damaged," Neeraj Sharma said, adding that services would remain suspended until the situation

was brought under control. Indian home minister Rajnath Singh Friday held meetings with security officials before dispatching additional troops to the state and appealed to protesters for peace.

But Jat leaders threatened to continue their protests after talks with Haryana's right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state government remained inconclusive. "The protest will only end when government accepts our demands. We won't get carried away by false assurances now," Yashpal Malik, the president of a national Jat organization that is leading the protest, told AFP.

The protests echo caste violence that swept the western state of Gujarat in August last year, leaving several dead.

That state saw weeks of protests by the privileged Patidar or Patel caste, who demanded special treatment to put them on an equal footing with lower castes. India sets aside a proportion of jobs and places to people from so-called lower and backward castes under measures intended to bring victims of the worst discrimination into the mainstream.

But the policy of "reservation" causes resentment among other communities who say it freezes them out. — AFP

BANGLADESH'S 'TREE MAN' UNDERGOES SURGERY

DHAKA: A Bangladeshi father dubbed "Tree Man" for massive bark-like warts on his hands and feet yesterday underwent a successful operation to remove some of the growths, a hospital said.

A nine-doctor team took three and a half hours to remove the giant warts from Abul Bajandar's right hand at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, facility director Samanta Lal Sen said.

The 26-year-old was admitted last month for an operation to remove the growths weighing at least five kilograms (11 pounds) that first began appearing 10 years ago. "It was a successful operation. We removed warts from all five fingers of his right hand. He's now happy and was laughing," Sen said.

"We'll now review his condition for the next three weeks before deciding whether to conduct more operations. It's a big challenge," Bajandar, from the southern district of Khulna, was diagnosed with epidermodysplasia verruciformis, an extremely rare genetic condition dubbed "tree-man disease" that causes the skin growths.

He became a celebrity with people travelling to Khulna over the years to see the "Tree Man" and hundreds visiting him in hospital. He was given the all-clear for surgery after tests confirmed the warts were not cancerous. The Bangladesh government agreed to bear the costs of his treatment and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was given an update on his condition, Sen said.

Bajandar's wife Halima Khatun saw her husband after the operation and said he looked "relaxed and happy".

Hospital director Sen said there were only three known cases of epidermodysplasia verruciformis in the world and Bajandar's was the only one in Bangladesh. Bajandar told AFP last month that he initially thought that the warts were harmless but slowly as the growths covered his hands and feet, he was forced to quit working as a bicycle rickshaw puller.

An Indonesian villager with massive warts all over his body underwent a string of operations in 2008 to remove them. — AFP



DHAKA: Bangladeshi patient Abul Bajandar (L), 26, dubbed "Tree Man" for the massive bark-like warts on his hands and feet, sits at Dhaka Medical College Hospital in Dhaka. — AFP

OFFICIAL: KABUL POWER TO BE RESTORED SOON

KABUL: Afghanistan's capital will soon have electricity fully restored, weeks after insurgents destroyed cables from Uzbekistan providing power to the capital, officials said yesterday. The military had cleared Taliban-linked fighters from the area of northern Baghlan province where the cables were destroyed by Taliban-linked fighters, said Wahidullah Tawhidi, spokesman for the Afghanistan electricity directorate. Engineers had reconnected some cables and the work should be completed within five days, he said.

Kabul, a city of almost 5 million, has been without secure power since late January, when militants sabotaged the cables during a military operation to clear them from the region. As a result, residents have shivered through the last stages of a mild winter, many relying on wood-burning stoves or buying generators run on diesel.

The city relies on power transmitted via cables that stretch hundreds of kilometers (miles) across the country. The destruction of the cables during battles between government forces and the militants exposed the vulnerability of the capital to the war largely being fought elsewhere, as well as the country's reliance on power from outside its own borders. Afghanistan also buys electricity from Tajikistan. The governor of Baghlan, Abul Satar Barez, said the military had cleared insurgents from the Dand-e-Shahabuddin district, where the cables were cut by anti-government fighters.

"We hope that power will soon be reconnected to Kabul," he said. The military operation also aimed to ensure that Dand-e-Shahabuddin remained secure, to prevent further disruption. The Taliban have been fighting the government for 15 years. Following the drawdown of the international combat mission in 2014, the insurgents spread across the northern provinces bordering Central Asia. The insurgents are currently fighting on three fronts, engaging Afghan forces in the northern province of Badakhshan, bordering Tajikistan, in Kunduz - where they took control of the provincial capital for a short period in September - and in Helmand, a major drug-producing province in the south. — AP



NEW DELHI: Nepalese Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli, left, prepares to shake hands with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi before their meeting in New Delhi yesterday. — AP

INDIA PLEDGES \$250M TO REBUILD QUAKE-HIT NEPAL

NEW DELHI: India yesterday pledged \$250 million for post-earthquake reconstruction in Nepal as the two countries try to heal strained ties following protests in Nepal over the country's new constitution. The assistance, covering housing, health, education and cultural heritage in Nepal's earthquake-hit areas, is part of an accord signed by the countries' foreign ministers during Nepalese Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli's visit to India.

Nearly 9,000 people were killed in a 2015 earthquake and aftershocks in Nepal. Nearly a million houses and buildings were damaged.

Oli and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also inaugurated on Saturday a transmission line for the supply of Indian elec-

tricity to Nepal under an Indian credit line of \$13.5 million.

Nepal will use \$100 million of the Indian assistance for the construction of 50,000 houses in the 14 districts most severely affected by the quake. Under the accord, \$50 million each would be utilized in the health, education and cultural heritage sectors in 31 earthquake-hit districts of Nepal.

Oli said the main purpose of his visit "is to clear the misunderstanding that surfaced in the last few months." Political protests in Nepal disrupted the supply of petroleum and other products from India, creating a rift in bilateral relations. Nepal blamed India and its support of ethnic Madhesi protesters for the disruption in supplies, a charge denied by India.—AP