

UN calls on Philippines to probe killing of rights activists

'Gunmen haul foreign hostages into remote mountains'

SAMAL, Philippines, Sept 23, (Agencies): Gunmen holding three foreigners and one Filipina hostage slipped past a naval cordon and escaped to remote mountains in the southern Philippines, leaving few clues to their identities, police said Wednesday. Elite army troops were trying to track the bandits while air force helicopters were readied for a possible rescue as the gunmen

trekked into Davao Oriental province, a hotbed of Maoist and Islamic rebels, said Senior Superintendent Aaron Aquino, the region's deputy police commander. The gunmen seized the Norwegian manager of a luxury island resort on Monday night, along with two Canadian tourists and one of their local girlfriends. The victims were aboard yachts anchored at the

resort's marina. The abductions added to a string of kidnappings of foreigners and locals in the conflict-plagued south since the 1990s, which have been typically carried out by Islamic militants seeking to extort ransoms. "Rest assured, our security sector will not stop until they catch this group," President Benigno Aquino told reporters.

The president's assurance echoed comments made by the nation's leaders whenever a foreigner has been kidnapped, but the captives' releases have generally only been secured with ransom payments. Adding to concerns about the captives, police said Wednesday the gunmen had evaded a naval blockade around Samal island, where the abductions took place.

The gunmen had sailed about 50 kms (30 miles) east to Davao Oriental, a poor region on the far southeastern edge of Mindanao island close to Indonesia with remote mountains and isolated fishing communities. Meanwhile, the United Nations on Tuesday called on the Philippine government to investigate immediately the

killings of three human rights activists on a southern island affected by long-running armed conflict. In a statement, UN special rapporteur Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, on the rights of indigenous people, and Michel Forst, on the situation of human rights defenders, expressed serious concern about increasing rights violations in the area.

Afghan militants kill NATO soldier in attack on US base

No cover-up on 'bacha bazi': NATO

KABUL, Sept 23, (Agencies): Afghan militants killed a NATO coalition force member during an attack on the US air base at Bagram, outside Kabul, NATO said in a statement on Wednesday.

The attack on the main military airfield in Afghanistan took place on Tuesday evening and the nationality of the

service member could not immediately be released, a NATO official said. The NATO statement did not identify which militant group was responsible for the attack, though most of the groups active fall under the broad umbrella of the Taliban. Bagram air base, which is guarded by US Marines and partnered forces, frequently comes under rocket attack from militants. Fighting in Afghanistan has escalated since most foreign forces withdrew from last year and Afghan forces are bearing the brunt of



Members of the Afghan Mobile Mini Children's Circus (MMCC) perform during a street concert to campaign for peace in the city of Kabul on Sept 21. A number of civil society activists performed in the 'street concert', which featured entertaining shows in downtown city of Kabul in a campaign for peace. (AFP)

the conflict. A Taliban government was ousted by a US-led coalition in 2001 and its militants have been waging an increasingly violent insurgency over a decade.

On Tuesday alone, at least 25 members of the Afghan army and police were killed in clashes, an interior ministry report showed.

The NATO coalition has lost nine members of its force this year. Around 13,000 NATO troops are engaged in a new two-year training mission.

In addition, several thousand US military personnel are still engaged in combat duties but details of their operations have not been disclosed.

Meanwhile, the top NATO commander in Afghanistan on Tuesday denied reports that the Pentagon had ordered US troops to ignore the sexual abuse of young boys by Afghan police and militias.

The New York Times reported Sunday that US troops in Afghanistan had been instructed by their superiors to overlook cases of Afghan police or commanders sexually abusing teenage boys, even if it took place on military bases.

The practice is known as "bacha bazi", literally "boy play" in local languages.

The Afghan Local Police, created by NATO to help fight Taliban insurgents, has a poor reputation and is frequently accused by local residents of rape and extortion.

Multiple

The Times based its report on accounts from multiple soldiers and the father of a marine who was killed in 2012.

"My son said that his officers told him to look the other way because it's their culture," Gregory Buckley Sr said.

The report added that former US special forces Captain Dan Quinn beat up an Afghan militia commander for keeping a boy chained to his bed as a sex slave, and afterwards was stripped of his command and withdrawn from Afghanistan.

On Tuesday General John Campbell, who oversees 13,000 US and allied troops in the country to train their local counterparts and carry out counter-terror operations, denied any such policy was in place.

"I personally have served multiple tours of duty in Afghanistan and am absolutely confident that no such theatre policy has ever existed here, and certainly, no such policy has existed throughout my tenure as commander," he said.

"I further expect that any suspicions of sexual abuse will be immediately reported to the chain of command, regardless of who the alleged perpetrators or victims are.

"If the abuse involves Afghans, a report shall be forwarded to me through operations channels, copied to the Staff Judge Advocate, so that the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan can be advised and requested to take action."

Campbell also said he had talked to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on the issue.

The Afghan Interior Ministry also issued a statement rejecting reports that it was not addressing the problem. "Bacha bazi is not only deemed a heinous and indecent act in the Afghan Culture, but is also illegal under the Afghan laws," the statement said.

"The interior ministry reiterates that Bacha bazi will not be tolerable in the ranks of Afghan Local Police and if there are any credible evidence in the regard, the interior ministry will seriously prosecute and punish those involved in it."

The Afghan government has also in the past tried to crack down on the ancient and outlawed practice of child abuse, which is prevalent across rural parts of the country.

Dayan tied to West Bank settlements

Israeli envoy's appointment to Brazil in danger

Saudi must halt execution of protester

'Bin Laden bodyguard' transferred from Gitmo

JERUSALEM, Sept 23, (AP): In a landmark test case for Israel, the appointment of its next ambassador to Brazil is suddenly in trouble due to his ties to the West Bank settlement movement.

Brazil has reportedly expressed objections to the appointment of Dani Dayan, raising questions about when or even if he will take up the post. The affair has threatened to embarrass Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who chose Dayan for the job, and reflects growing international impatience over continued Israeli settlement construction on occupied lands claimed by the Palestinians.

On the surface, the controversy has little to do with Dayan's qualifications. A successful businessman, Dayan is affable and eloquent, and being an immigrant from Argentina, familiar with Latin American issues.

But Dayan is also perhaps the world's best-known West Bank settler, serving for many years as the chairman and chief spokesman for the movement. That work, in which he defended settlements on TV screens around the world and spoke out against Palestinian independence, is now threatening to cost him his job.

The Israeli news site Ynet reported this week that Brazil has expressed misgivings over the appointment because of his ties to the settlements.

Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff's office declined comment, as did the Israeli Foreign Ministry and Netanyahu's office. Dayan also refused to comment. But a Brazilian diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity because the government isn't speaking publicly about the issue, confirmed the report.

Israel is not believed to have had a prominent ambassador who was a settler, although two-term former Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman lived in a settlement and is an ultra-nationalist known for his anti-Arab views. If Dayan's appointment is canceled, it

WASHINGTON, Sept 23, (AFP): A Saudi Arabian detainee said by the US military to have been a bodyguard for Osama bin Laden has been repatriated from Guantanamo Bay after more than a decade behind bars, the Pentagon said Tuesday.

Abdul Shalabi, 39, was first captured by Pakistani forces in December 2001 and was transferred to Guantanamo the following month. But in June this year, a review panel "determined continued law of war detention of Abdul Shalabi does not remain necessary to protect against a continuing significant threat to the security of the United States," Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook said.

Shalabi, who was a long-time hunger striker, is being released as part of the Saudi government's rehabilitation program for ex-detainees and he will be monitored for years to come.

"The United States coordinated with the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to ensure this transfer took place consistent with appropriate security and humane treatment measures," Cook said.

Shalabi's release means 114 inmates now remain in Guantanamo. President Barack Obama has repeatedly demanded the closure of

the facility but has struggled in the face of opposition in Congress and from other countries reluctant to take in one-time terror suspects.

According to a 2008 Defense Department file on Shalabi, he was captured while attempting to cross the Afghan-Pakistan border after fleeing bin Laden's Tora Bora mountain complex.

He was captured as part of a group called the "Dirty Thirty," which included other bin Laden bodyguards, the file states.

Also:

GENEVA: Saudi Arabia must not execute a man who was convicted of joining a criminal group after participating in Arab Spring protests when he was 17, UN rights experts said Tuesday.

Ali Mohammed al-Nimr was in high school in 2012 when he joined reform protests in Qatif in the eastern part of the kingdom.

In a statement, the UN experts said he was reportedly tortured, coerced into a confession and denied adequate access to a lawyer before and during a trial that did not meet international standards.

His appeal was also handled "with a complete disregard for international standards," according to the statement.

would be the first time an Israeli ambassadorial appointment has been scuttled over the settlement issue.

The Brazilian concerns represent the latest sign of growing international displeasure over Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

The Palestinians claim the two areas, captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war, as parts of a future state. The international community opposes Israeli

settlements in these territories, saying they undermine the goal of dividing the land between two countries. More than 550,000 Jewish settlers live on occupied land.

Israel has long brushed aside international criticism of settlement construction, arguing that the matter should be resolved in negotiations with the Palestinians. But the international community has grown increasingly impatient.

PM replaces resigned Kurdish ministers

Turkish soldier 'killed' in PKK attack in southeast

DIYARBAKIR, Turkey, Sept 23, (Agencies): A Turkish soldier was killed in southeastern Diyarbakir province in a new attack blamed on the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), security sources said.

Sergeant Mehmet Ali Sarak, 25, came under fire from PKK militants with automatic rifles while on his way to his army base in the Silvan district of Diyarbakir, the sources told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Sarak, who was in civilian clothes when he was shot, died at the scene, the source added. A security operation was launched to track down the assailants. Ankara launched a major "anti-terrorist" campaign against the PKK in late July, aimed at flushing it out of its strongholds in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq.

The group has hit back hard, killing dozens of police and soldiers in almost daily bomb and shooting attacks.

Nearly 150 soldiers and police have been killed in attacks since July blamed on the PKK compared with more than 1,000 rebels, according to pro-government media.

The escalation has shattered a two-year-ceasefire which had raised hopes of an end to the PKK's three-decade insurgency, in which more than 40,000 people have been killed.

President Tayyip Erdogan has stepped up criticism of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) since it won 13 percent of the vote in June polls, depriving the AK Party (AKP) of an overall majority for the first time since 2002.

With a re-run of the vote set for Nov 1, Erdogan, who founded the AKP, has accused the HDP opposition of links to fighters of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), deemed a terrorist organisation by both Washington and Ankara.

The HDP condemns the violence in the southeast and denies backing the PKK.

The Turkish military has resumed attacks on Kurdish militant camps in northern Iraq since the fragile ceasefire collapsed. At least 100 soldiers

and hundreds of PKK have been killed. On Tuesday, Turkey's only two HDP cabinet ministers, EU Minister Ali Haydar Konca and Development Minister Muslum Dogan, said they would resign from Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's month-old caretaker government.

Konca told a news conference the two faced difficulties that prevented them carrying out ministerial duties, adding that the interior minister had not been receptive to their concerns about a security crisis in the largely Kurdish town of Cizre.

Cizre, near Turkey's borders with Syria and Iraq, has become a flashpoint in two months of deepening violence in the largely Kurdish southeast.

The HDP said this month that more than 20 civilians had been killed in security operations there, while the government said it had killed as many as 32 militants and one civilian.

While Davutoglu's caretaker government was set up as an interim arrangement to steer the country toward Nov.1 elections, the sudden departure of its only two HDP ministers is likely to underscore concerns about widening polarisation in Turkey.

Davutoglu appointed two new cabinet ministers to replace two Kurdish lawmakers who resigned from the interim government amid a flare-up of violence between Kurdish rebels and the army.

EU Affairs Minister Ali Haydar Konca and Development Minister Muslum Dogan resigned on Tuesday after accusing Turkey's government of promoting a "logic of war", two months after a 2013 ceasefire with Kurdish rebels fell apart.

Davutoglu late Tuesday swiftly appointed two new ministers described as independents.

Cuneyd Duzyol, under-secretary at the development ministry, replaces Dogan, while Beril Dedeoglu, a female professor at Istanbul's Galatasaray University, was appointed EU minister.

News in Brief

Clashes after funeral: Clashes broke out Wednesday between Palestinian youths and Israeli forces in the West Bank city of Hebron following the funeral of a young woman shot dead after allegedly trying to stab a soldier.

Around 50 youths threw stones at soldiers, who responded with stun grenades and tear gas in the flashpoint city, where some 500 Israeli settlers live under heavy guard among Palestinians. The clashes followed the funeral of 18-year-old student Hadeel al-Hashlamon, who died after being shot by Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint on Tuesday. (AFP)

Tight security in Nigeria: Nigeria on Wednesday imposed tight movement restrictions in the restive northeast after Boko Haram bombings that killed more than 100 raised fears of fresh attacks over the Eid al-Adha festival. The military said the use of all vehicles

would be banned throughout Borno state during the Muslim festival, which is known as Sallah in Nigeria and marked with two days' public holiday from Thursday.

"All movements using vehicles, bicycles and animals like horses, camels and donkeys in Maiduguri will be restricted as from Wednesday 5:00 pm (1600 GMT)," said army spokesman Tukur Gusau. (AFP)

Bodies of 8 Mexicans flown back: The bodies of eight Mexican tourists killed in a mistaken attack by Egyptian security forces earlier this month have been returned to Mexico.

Mexico's Foreign Relations Department says the bodies arrived on a commercial flight Tuesday and have been taken to a Mexico City morgue. The bodies will be subject to a forensic examination before being handed over to their families.

Six Mexican tourists who were wounded in the Sept. 13 incident returned to Mexico on Friday. All are expected to recover. (AP)

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