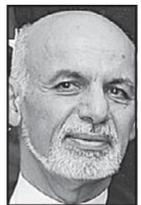


**Afghanistan**

**Hundreds killed, wounded**

**Afghan forces sent to bolster defences**

KABUL, Aug 13, (RTRS): Afghan security forces backed by US advisers and air strikes fought on Monday to drive Taliban fighters out of the embattled city of Ghazni, where hundreds of people have been killed or wounded during four days of fighting.



Ghani

The Taliban attack on Ghazni, a strategic centre on the main highway linking the capital Kabul with southern Afghanistan, is a blow to President Ashraf Ghani weeks before parliamentary elections are due and dampens hopes of a start to peace talks.

The insurgents seized control of the districts of Khawaja Omari, north of Ghazni city and Ajrestan, in the west, with officials saying dozens of Afghan security forces had either been killed or were missing.

Diplomats in Kabul said the government had admitted being taken by surprise by the attack and after 72 hours with minimal public comment from the presidential palace, Ghani announced on Twitter that reinforcements would be sent to the city urgently.

Afghan officials said US special forces units were on the ground helping to coordinate air strikes and ground operations and the US military said American aircraft had launched two dozen air strikes since Friday.

"US advisers are assisting the Afghan forces and US airpower has delivered decisive blows to the Taliban, killing more than 140 since August 10," said Lt Col Martin O'Donnell, the spokesman for US Forces-Afghanistan.

The Afghan government controls Ghazni, he said, adding there was no threat of collapse from "isolated and disparate" Taliban forces in the city with Highway 1, the main route from Kabul, open.

"That said, clearing operations are ongoing and sporadic clashes with the Taliban, particularly outside the city, continue," he added.

The Ghazni fighting adds to an increasingly fevered political atmosphere ahead of parliamentary elections in October, which have faced widespread concerns over potential security threats from both the Taliban and other armed groups. As troops were battling Taliban fighters in Ghazni, a suicide bomber in Kabul detonated explosives near the office of the independent election commission, where dozens of protesters had gathered, killing at least one police officer and wounding another, said a security official who sought anonymity.

The protesters had turned out in support of a parliamentary candidate disqualified by electoral officials over suspected links with illegal armed groups, as barred lawmakers encourage protests to disrupt the panel's activities.



Indian paramilitary force personnel march pasts during the final dress rehearsal ahead of Independence Day celebration in Agartala, the capital of northeastern state of Tripura on Aug 13. Indian Independence Day is celebrated every year on Aug 15 to commemorate the nation's independence from the United Kingdom on August 15, 1947. (AFP)

**Subcontinent**

**'Ease political crackdown':** Indian leader Narendra Modi on Sunday called for greater democracy and the restoration of an independent judiciary in the Maldives ahead of a presidential election in September.

The Indian Ocean archipelago nation has been in turmoil in recent months, with strongman President Abdulla Yameen jailing or forcing into exile all of his main opponents.

Modi told the Times of India newspaper in an email interview that political developments in the Maldives "have been a matter of considerable international concern".

"We hope that (the) Maldives government will ensure early resumption of the political process and allow democratic institutions, including the judiciary to function independently in a fair and transparent manner," the Indian prime minister said.

"This will create (a) conducive environment for the presidential elections."

The election is scheduled for Sept 23 but the opposition has expressed fears that it could be delayed.

Yameen declared a state of emergency in February after the nation's top court ordered that MPs sacked by the president be restored and dissidents freed from jail.

The Maldives' chief justice and Supreme Court judges were subsequently arrested, along with Yameen's half-brother Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who ruled the country for 30 years until 2008. (AFP)

**Pakistan's parliament meets:** Pakistan's newly elected parliament convened Monday for the first time since last month's

general elections that saw the party of former cricket star turned politician Imran Khan win most seats, propelling him toward the post of the country's next prime minister.

The lawmakers were sworn in at a brief ceremony in the 342-seat National Assembly, the decision-making lower house of parliament. Later on Monday, fireworks are to mark the eve of Pakistan's Independence Day.

The parliament is to elect a Speaker and his deputy Wednesday and vote on the prime minister the following day. The swearing-in ceremony for the prime minister is due Saturday.

Khan's populist Tahreek-e-Insaf party won 115 seats in the July 25 vote, requiring it to form a coalition.

In the days after the elections, party spokesman Fawad Chaudhry said more lawmakers joined the party's ranks and that it now enjoys the backing of 180 parliament members after several women lawmakers, minority and independents sided with Khan. He needs 172 lawmaker votes to become prime minister.

Khan has campaigned on the promise of a "New Pakistan" with justice for all, pledging to wipe out corruption and help the poor. He



Khan



Modi

has said he would run the country like it has never been run before, though some of his popular and influential backers, who joined his party weeks before the elections, have questionable pasts and some of them even face charges. (AP)

**Pakistan mine blast kills 8:** A blast at a coal mine has killed at least eight workers on the outskirts of Pakistan's southwestern city of Quetta, officials said on Monday, with five more feared dead.

The mine caved in after the miners used dynamite during an excavation in Sinjidi, some 45 kilometres (28 miles) east of Quetta, the capital of oil and gas rich Balochistan province.

"There were up to 22 workers present in different tunnels in the mine, some who were as deep as 4,000 feet (1,219 metres) when the blast occurred," provincial chief mines inspector Muhammad Itikhar told AFP.

Nine workers who were in the upper tunnels were pulled to safety, he said, but rescue teams later found the dead bodies of eight miners at the depth of 800 feet (240 metres). He said rescue teams were still working to find the remaining five miners, but do not expect to find them alive. (AFP)

**Top B'desh photographer jailed:** Award-winning Bangladesh photographer Shahidul Alam was in jail on Monday, 10 days after being arrested following an interview with Al Jazeera about massive student demonstrations, police said.

Alam, 63, who accused police of assaulting him in custody and was earlier sent to a hospital for a check-up following an order from the high court, was taken to a magistrate's court late on Sunday. (AFP)

**Africa**

**Mali counts votes:** Vote counting was underway across Mali on Monday after a tense presidential runoff marked by violence, polling station closures and low turnout.

President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, 73, is the clear frontrunner in a reprise of his faceoff against former finance minister Soumaila Cisse, 68.



Keita

In a reminder of the jihadist threat that was a major campaign issue, the overseer of a polling station in Arkodia, in the northern region of Timbuktu, was shot dead by armed Islamist militants, local officials said.

On the eve of voting, authorities said they had disrupted a plot to carry out "targeted attacks" in the capital Bamako.

More than a hundred other stations in the restive north and centre were closed by security fears, according to local monitors POCIM (the Mali Citizen Observation Pool), which had more than 2,000 observers deployed around the country. (AFP)

**'Prosecutor should leave post':** South Africa's Constitutional Court on Monday ruled the appointment of the chief prosecutor, who was given his job after former president Jacob Zuma removed his predecessor, was invalid and ordered that he be replaced within 90 days.

Shaun Abrahams was appealing against an earlier High Court judgment that ruled that the removal of predecessor Mxolisi Nxasana was unlawful and that his own appointment be revoked.

Zuma faced a string of corruption allegations during his time in office, and Abrahams was accused by the opposition and rights groups of shielding the president from prosecution. (RTRS)

**Suspected jihadis kill 6:** Burkina Faso State TV reports that five gendarmes and one civilian have been killed between the rural communes of Boungou and Ougarou in the nation's far east.

It reports the vehicle hit an explosive device late Saturday while gendarmes were escorting mining workers to their extraction site.

This comes as Islamic extremists are moving to the region, where they can hide in the thick forested areas, and are launching more attacks on security forces.

Governor Ousmane Traore said his eastern territory was under threat by young men who had received extremist training in Mali and have now returned to launch a katiba, or brigade. (AP)

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