

## Nigerian military arrest suspected oil thieves

**LAGOS (AFP)** — Nigeria's special military joint task force (JTF) protecting oil installations in the restive Niger Delta has arrested three suspects for stealing crude oil, a spokesman said.

"The suspects were arrested following a tip-off at a checkpoint at Bomadi, Delta state, carrying a substance suspected to be crude oil," Colonel Rabe Abubakar said late Friday.

He said they had been handed over to the country's anti-graft agency EFCC for further investigation and prosecution.

"The task force maintains its zero tolerance stance on illegal oil bunkering (stealing of crude oil) and other related criminal activities in the Niger Delta," Abubakar said.

The stealing of crude oil from the oil-rich Niger Delta by armed gangs, pirates and their foreign collaborators costs Nigeria millions of dollars in lost revenue every year.

## Two U.S. soldiers killed in Afghanistan: military

**KHOST, Afghanistan (AFP)** — Two U.S. soldiers were killed in an explosion in eastern Afghanistan Saturday, the U.S. military said, as Afghan authorities reported that 32 rebels died in an ensuing U.S. helicopter attack.

"There was an incident with a possible IED (improvised explosive device) in Paktika province this morning in which two U.S. service members were killed," Sergeant Charles March, a military spokesman said.

The military spokesman could not give further details but Hamidullah Zhwak, a spokesman for the local administration, said the U.S. casualties occurred when a fuel tanker was exploded by the rebels in front of a government building.

"After the blast the American helicopters came in and attacked the Taliban who were preparing to attack the district headquarters," he said, referring to the Zirok district where the incident took place.

"Thirty-two Taliban were killed," Zhwak said.

The U.S. military, however, could not immediately confirm the militant casualties.

## Ethiopia criticizes HRW over terrorism report

**ADDIS ABABA (AFP)** — Ethiopia has criticized the Human Rights Watch over its report that the country's draft anti-terrorism law would violate human rights.

"HRW's so-called analysis is replete with harsh generalizations," Ethiopia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement Friday.

"It cannot be considered a credible commentary on compatibility of the draft law with Ethiopia's human rights obligations."

The U.S.-based watchdog on Tuesday said the law, currently before parliament, broadly defined terrorism, risked muzzling political speech and encouraging unfair trials.

The law presented by the government of President Meles Zenawi is to counter the activities of some separatist groups.

In recent months, Ethiopia's parliament has passed a series of laws tightening up on the activities of non-governmental organizations, associations and the local media, while most political opponents are in prison or living in exile.

# Barack Obama's moment of truth in Afghanistan

Operation Khanjar represents the American President's first military initiative since entering the White House.

Operation Khanjar or "sword strike" was launched with two immediate aims: to break the militants' grip over "Taliban central" so free presidential elections can be held, and to clear enough space to introduce the benefits of the good governance Afghans have not known for 30 years, if ever.

Brigadier-General Larry Nicholson flagged off more than 4,000 U.S. marines with a Churchillian statement of intent. "Where we go we will stay, and where we stay, we will hold, build and work toward transition of all security responsibilities to Afghan forces," he said.

From this new reality, a negotiation is possible. There may be some unreconcilables, but it will be manageable. So the theory goes, and most hope and pray it's one which holds true, because this is President Obama's much-vaunted "surge" and there does not appear to be a plan B.

The omens look better than they have some time. The Americans have withdrawn from Iraq's cities, which means Afghanistan will have its full focus in a way it hasn't had



Operation Khanjar represents the American President's first military initiative since entering the White House.

Photo: Reuters

since the initial invasion in 2001. Pakistan appears to have finally realized the Taliban and al-Qaeda threaten its existence as a state and no longer feels so passionately that it's "America's war." More importantly, Pakistan's armed forces appear to have reached the same conclusion after a series of bloody attacks on its major cities. It moved its forces up to the Afghan border to capture Taliban militants fleeing the

American advance. Finally there appears to be evidence of the joined up thinking President Obama's new "Af-Pak" policy promised.

But both Western critics and those who oppose America's presence and influence in Pakistan and Afghanistan say it's the wishful thinking of man looking for a way out. "It's front-loaded withdrawal," as one retired Pakistani general described it last night.

There are two major weaknesses:

The Karzai government is riddled with corruption which has alienated many Afghans from both his administration and his NATO allies.

Official figures show that despite hundreds of millions of pounds in foreign aid for raising and training Afghanistan's national police, there are many areas which still have no functioning police force at all. The Western benchmarks of good governance — access to decent educa-

tion and services — are in many parts of Afghanistan hard to make out from the rubble.

One diplomat in Kabul last night said he believed the new strategy has a year or two to deliver before Afghans decisively turn against them, but a former head of Pakistan's ISI intelligence service, General Hamid Gul, said he believes Obama's surge will have foundered by October.

The Taliban will fight a two-pronged strategy, he said: retreat to the hills where America's air power will not be so effective, while the remainder will disappear and wage a guerilla resistance campaign.

He believes the Taliban will learn more about American weaknesses from this new battle, as he says they did in Operation Anaconda in 2002. Then, several thousand American special forces with air support failed to deliver the knock-out blow they had expected.

The truth behind Operation Khanjar is that the Taliban has fought the western allies to a stalemate in Helmand, and now the only hope lies in a devastating display of overwhelming force, the rapid delivery of good services, and the remotely possibility that it will be enough to impress senior Taliban commanders.

"In other words," as one leading Afghanistan expert said, "the U.S. has to show its ability to inflict some serious damage on the Taliban before any real political talks with the Taliban, to reach agreement with at least some significant factions, so maybe it ends up as scoring a few points before the last round when the ref will decide." That appears to be the best victory in prospect.

(Source: The Daily Telegraph)

## Taliban claim to down Pakistani military helicopter

**PESHAWAR, Pakistan (AFP)** — Taliban militants Saturday claimed responsibility for a military helicopter crash that killed 26 people in the rugged tribal area in the country's north.

The helicopter crashed Friday on the border of the semi-autonomous Orakzai and Khyber tribal regions and officials said no one survived.

"We shot down the helicopter," a spokesman for Taliban insurgents based in the nearby Darra Adam Khel region said in a telephone call to AFP.

The spokesman identifying himself as Muhammad said it was in retaliation for the Pakistani military operation in South Waziristan, a Taliban and Al-Qaeda



stronghold.

A military spokesman rejected the claim, reiterating Saturday that the helicopter had crashed due to a "technical fault."

"Taliban militants frequently make false claims," he added.

"All 26 people on board died and the

wreckage of the helicopter has been removed," he said adding that an inquiry had been ordered.

On Friday a senior security official said an MI-17 (military) helicopter crashed due to a technical fault, killing 26 security personnel on board.

He said that the site of crash was 20 kilometers (12 miles) from Peshawar, the capital of North West Frontier Province.

Pakistan has been fighting a two-month battle to dislodge militants in three districts of the northwest.

The military has also launched air raids in the tribal belt to prepare for a second front against the Taliban in South Waziristan, a stronghold of feared warlord Baitullah Mehsud.

## Myanmar denies UN chief a meeting

**NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar (The New York Times)** — Ban Ki-moon, the United Nations secretary general, said Saturday that his request to see the democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had been rejected by the country's ruling generals.

Mr. Ban said he had asked the generals to free their many political prisoners, including Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi, but there was no sign yet of movement on the issue from the junta. He said Friday that the military leaders reminded him that Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi was on trial.

Mr. Ban is hoping to win the release of political prisoners — estimated at 2,100 by international humanitarian organizations — ahead of elections scheduled for 2010.

Mr. Ban's rare meeting with Senior Gen. Than Shwe and the other four generals who constitute the ruling State Peace and Development Council came as the government declared a one-week pause in Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi's trial.

Mr. Ban called his exchange with the generals "frank," and a senior United Nations official described the discussion as "forceful" on both sides.

Mr. Ban said he told the generals it would be important to release Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi and the other political prisoners to ensure the broadest possible participation in the election.

"This election should be a credible, fair, inclusive and legitimate one where all the Myanmar people can express their will in a free way," Mr. Ban said after meeting with the generals. "I was assured that Myanmar's authorities will make sure that this election will be held in fair and free and transparent manner."

At the same time, Mr. Ban asked for a series of steps toward that goal, though it was unclear whether the military government would endorse such a development, senior United Nations official said. The steps include revamping the election laws publicly and establishing an electoral commission. Not even the aborted election of 1990, which Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi's party won, truly covered the whole nation, so another step would be allowing the party, the National League for Democracy, to open



UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon waves upon his arrival at a hotel Friday, July 3, 2009 in Yangon, Myanmar. Ban said he would lobby Myanmar's junta chief directly Friday for the release of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, acknowledging that his high-profile mission will be "very difficult."

(AP Photo)

offices across the country and to permit her to campaign.

Mr. Ban said he also urged the generals to resume their dialogue with the opposition in a substantive and meaningful way, including with Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi.

Mr. Ban is expected to have an additional, unscheduled meeting with General Than Shwe and is due to make a speech about the country's future to a group of nongovernmental organizations involved in relief efforts for the past 14 months. He also plans to tour the Irrawaddy Delta, where Cyclone Nargis struck a devastating blow in May 2008, killing 138,000 people. His visit at that time opened the door for international aid organizations to play a greater role in relief efforts.

But Bishow Parajuli, the humanitarian coordinator for the country, said there was currently a backlog of about 219 international aid workers seeking visas to work in the country. The visa process has slowed since March, he said, another issue Mr. Ban took up with General Than Shwe.

International human rights groups have urged Mr. Ban to take a tough line on the junta. He tried, however, to play down expectations, saying that it would be a difficult trip, but that it was important to engage the ruling generals.

"I am very pleased to continue our discussion," Mr. Ban said in his opening remarks to General Than Shwe. "I appreciate your commitment to move your country forward."

The meeting was held in a soaring reception room painted with a mural of Buddhist temples set in the jungle, the landscape around Naypyidaw (pronounced nay-pee-DAW), the sprawling, isolated capital the generals constructed out of the rice fields and jungle about 200 miles north of Yangon. Yangon, formerly Rangoon, is the country's main city.

The official reception building here is called Bayinnaung Hall, named after a 16th-century warrior king who united much of what is today Myanmar, as well as parts of India, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.



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## Russia to allow U.S. arms shipments to Afghanistan

**MOSCOW (AP)** — Russia said Friday it will allow the United States to ship weapons across its territory to Afghanistan, a long-sought move that bolsters U.S. military operations but potentially gives the Kremlin leverage over critical American supplies.

The announcement by a top Kremlin aide came ahead of President Barack Obama's visit to Moscow next week, when the deal is expected to be signed during a summit aimed at improving the nations' strained relations.

Russia's concession on arms shipments also came as the Obama administration is shifting the U.S. military's focus from Iraq to Afghanistan, where a massive American offensive is currently under way in Taliban-controlled areas of Helmand province.

Russia has been allowing the United States to ship non-lethal supplies across its territory for operations in Afghanistan, and Kremlin officials had suggested further cooperation was likely.

Kremlin foreign policy adviser Sergei Prikhodko told reporters Friday that he expected deal would enable the U.S. to ship lethal cargo and would include shipments by air and land.

He said it was unclear if U.S. soldiers or other personnel would be permitted to travel through Russian territory or airspace.

"They haven't asked us for it," he said.

The normal supply route to landlocked Afghanistan via Pakistan has come under repeated Taliban attack, and the U.S. and NATO have been eager to have an alternate overland supply route through Russia and the Central Asian countries.

Confirmation of such a deal appeared aimed at setting a constructive tone for the meetings between Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on Monday and Tuesday. After years of increasing strain, both governments have expressed hope the summit will put ties between the former Cold War rivals back on track.

Military analyst Alexander Golts, however, said the U.S. should be under no illusion about Russia's intentions. Although Medvedev has set a warmer tone in relations with the West, his predecessor, Vladimir Putin, retains considerable power as prime minister.

"The least impression you should get from this is that Putin's foreign policy style foresees gestures of goodwill," Golts said.

The Russian leadership still has the mindset of "19th-century Realpolitik" and seeks the ability to hold its partners "by the throat," he said.

"If something goes wrong in Russian-U.S. relations, this transit will cease as quickly and suddenly as it started," Golts said.

While Russia has stressed a willingness to work with the West to bring stability to Afghanistan, it has shown that it can use its clout in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia to hobble U.S. efforts.