

NEWS IN BRIEF



Taliban confirm Hakeemullah's death



KARACHI (Dawn) — The Taliban based in Orakzai Agency confirmed on Tuesday that Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan chief Hakeemullah Mehsud is dead.

According to a DawnNews report, Mehsud died on Sunday in Multan after succumbing to injuries received in a drone attack in Shaktoji village. Sources said that Maulvi Noor Jamal has been nominated as Mehsud's successor.

Maulvi Noor Jamal is a native of the Orakzai Agency and rose to power as the leader of the Taliban in the Kurram tribal area.

He was also given responsibilities for Orakzai when the military began the Waziristan offensive in October. Jamal is in his late thirties and was a maulana at a local madrassah before he was made the leader of the Taliban in Kurram. He had a close relationship with Mehsud and is known for his brutality.

One resident who left Khurram for fear of being wanted by him said Jamal "...kills humans like one will kill chickens."

Jamal is also the man who is allegedly overseeing the flogging of two men and a teenage boy in a recently broadcast video.

Nigeria: Lawmakers empower vice president



ABUJA (AP) — Parliament empowered Vice President Goodluck Jonathan on Tuesday to take over for the ill president of oil-rich Nigeria, whose absence has stoked unrest in Africa's most populous country.

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate passed measures calling on Jonathan to act as president and commander in chief until President Umaru Yar'Adua returns from Saudi Arabia, where he has been receiving medical treatment for a heart condition since November.

Yar'Adua's absence has caused a cease-fire with militants in the oil-rich delta to unravel and had left no one formally in charge of the nation of 150 million. The crisis in a powerful country with a long history of coups and military dictatorships has drawn international attention, with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and European leaders calling on the nation to follow its constitution.

Newspapers began worrying about possible coup scenarios as Yar'Adua's absence grew longer. However, military leaders said several weeks ago they had no ambitions to take power and would respect the constitution.

Another major storm headed to snowy Mid-Atlantic



WASHINGTON — A second major snow storm in less than a week was blowing Tuesday toward the Mid-Atlantic region, where plows still hadn't touched some roads, utility workers were struggling to restore power and shovels were in short supply.

The storm hit the Midwest early Tuesday, closing schools and greeting commuters with slick, slushy roads from Indianapolis to Chicago. Powerful wind and snow were expected to crawl into Mid-Atlantic states by the afternoon, and could leave as much as 20 inches of new snow in Washington and 18 inches near Philadelphia — a Northeast travel hub — by Wednesday night.

Parts of the region were already buried under nearly 3 feet of snow.

Airlines that shut down flights to Washington over the weekend warned that more would be canceled and that travelers who didn't depart by Tuesday night were likely out of luck.

China sentences quake activist to 5 years' jail



A Chinese court Tuesday sentenced an activist who investigated the deaths of thousands of schoolchildren in the country's massive 2008 earthquake to five years in jail for inciting subversion of state power, the man's lawyer said.

The United States deplored the sentence handed down to Tan Zuoren by a court in southwestern Sichuan province, saying such convictions were politically motivated and urging China to immediately release the activist and others similarly prosecuted.

Attorney Pu Zhiqiang said Tan was convicted and sentenced Tuesday by the Chengdu Intermediate Court. Tan's trial in August had concluded with no ruling, during which police detained and threatened his supporters.

The conviction of inciting subversion of state power was based on Tan's activities in recent years to draw attention to the 1989 student-led demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square that ended in a deadly military crackdown. China routinely uses such broad and vaguely defined charges of subversion to imprison dissidents, sometimes for years.

(Source: ABC news)

Tymoshenko to challenge Ukraine vote

By staff and agencies

Reports from Ukraine say the prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, will challenge the result of Sunday's presidential election, which officials say was narrowly won by the opposition leader, Viktor Yanukovich.

Supporters of Mrs Tymoshenko said she would never recognize the legitimacy of the vote, and would demand a recount of ballots from some polling stations.

Serhiy Sobolev, a member of the Tymoshenko bloc, told a meeting on Tuesday that Sunday's vote "displayed a cynical violation of Ukrainian law" by the teams of Viktor Yanukovich, who led polls by a narrow three per cent.

"Consequently, the Tymoshenko bloc announces that we will defend in the courts our right, and the rights of our citizens, to honest and transparent elections," the Reuters news agency quoted him as saying.

According to local media, Tymoshenko has refused to concede defeat and told officials that she will "never recognize" the legitimacy of the election.

But Ukrainskaya Pravda, an online newspaper, said a significant section of her party, including the deputy parliament speaker, were hoping to persuade the prime minister to acknowledge Yanukovich's victory.

Official election results on Tuesday showed Yanukovich winning 48.94 per cent of the vote and Tymoshenko with 45.48 per cent, with 99.94 per cent of the ballots counted.

Thousands of Yanukovich supporters have rallied outside Kiev's central election commission in a bid to protect the result of the election.

A legal challenge to the narrow margin of victory could deny Ukraine a swift return to stability and rattle financial markets.

The country of 46 million people has been battered by the economic crisis and badly needs to restart talks with the International Monetary Fund on a \$16.4bn bail-out package. Since 2008 the national currency, the hryvnia, has lost 48 per cent of its value.



Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko (L) and opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich. International observers praised the way the election was run and urged Ukraine's leaders to respect the people's verdict.

The first-round vote in January set up a Feb. 7 run-off between opposition leader Yanukovich and Prime Minister Tymoshenko. Both are seen as friendlier to Russia than the current, pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko.

International observers have praised Sunday's election as "impressive" and the European Union said it was ready to work with Yanukovich.

Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) said there was no indication of fraud. "For everyone in Ukraine this election was a victory," Joao Soares, president of the OSCE's parliamentary assembly said.

OSCE's statement will make it much harder for Tymoshenko to sustain a legal challenge against the outcome.

Meanwhile, the U.S. embassy in Kiev issued a statement praising "the conduct of the February 7 second round of presidential elections," according to a brief statement issued Tuesday.

Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian president, congratulated Yanukovich on his success in

a phone call on Tuesday, the Kremlin said.

After the first-round of elections Medvedev said he hoped Ukraine's presidential election would boost ties with Moscow, which were badly damaged when a Kremlin-backed candidate lost the same race five years ago.

The official result signalled a remarkable comeback by Yanukovich, a 59-year-old former prime minister, who was disgraced after Russia declared him winner of a 2004 presidential election that turned out to be rigged.

The poll led to the "Orange Revolution" mass street protests which Tymoshenko co-led, resulting in his victory being quashed by a court and Viktor Yushchenko, his rival, being elected.

Yanukovich — who was expected to address thousands of his supporters in Kiev on Tuesday — will move swiftly to consolidate his power. Tymoshenko faces the unenviable choice of resigning as prime minister over the next few days or watching her fragile parliamentary coalition collapse. After that a new pro-Yanukovich coalition is certain to force her out.

Hundreds flee southern Afghan town ahead of planned NATO offensive

(Contd. from p. 1)

U.S. officials have long telegraphed their intention to seize Marjah. McChrystal said the element of surprise was not as important as letting citizens know that an Afghan government will be there to replace Taliban overlords and drug traffickers.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said there was no way to count the number of people who have left Marjah because many have moved in with relatives or rented houses in nearby towns instead of registering for emergency relief.

ICRC spokesman Bijan Farnoudi noted a first aid post in Marjah had recorded an increase in patients with battle wounds in the last few weeks.

He said the organization was poised to react quickly if a refugee crisis arises. "The burden on families taking in relatives for an extended amount of time can be significant," he said.

Ghulam Farooq Noorzai, the head of the provincial refugee department, estimated that 90 to 100 families had left the Marjah area because of concerns about the operation. Afghan families have an average of six members, according to private relief groups.

Refugee officials held an emergency meeting last week and decided to stockpile food and erect five big tents on a school compound in the nearby provincial capital Lashkar Gah to accommodate any influx, he said.

The Taliban were not preventing villag-

ers from leaving but were digging trenches and carrying in new heavy weapons on motorbikes.

Taliban claim new IED

The Taliban claimed Tuesday to have developed a new bomb nicknamed Omar after their fugitive leader and which they say is impossible Western mine sweepers to detect.

The biggest killer of Western troops in Afghanistan are home-made bombs, known as improvised explosive devices or IEDs, which the Taliban deploy to wide effect in their eight-year insurgency and detonate by remote control.

Western military intelligence officials have said most foreign troop deaths, which hit a record 520 last year, are caused by IEDs.



DAILY TELEGRAPH

Afghan death toll above Falklands level

Three soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan taking the British death toll above the number killed in the Falklands War.

The deaths brought the total dead since operations began in October 2001 to 256.

Two of the unnamed soldiers, from the Royal Scots Borderers, 1st Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland, died on a foot patrol in Helmand province on Sunday night while serving with the 3 Rifles battle group in the town of Sangin.

A third was killed in an explosion in the Nad-e-Ali district of Helmand. The deaths mean the campaign against the Taliban-led insurgency has taken more lives than the 74-day campaign to regain the Falkland Islands following Argentine invasion in 1982.

The Falklands campaign lasted ten-and-a-half weeks and British forces suffered days of terrible casualties as ships faced air attack from Argentine jets and troops fought to dislodge opponents dug into hillsides.

On June 8 alone, 48 died and more than 150 were wounded when Argentine aircraft attacked ships landing troops at Bluff Cove.

The Afghan campaign has instead seen a steady trickle of dead as Britain wages an eight-year-long counter insurgency campaign.

As the politically-sensitive milestone was passed, Bob Ainsworth, Defense Secretary, said it was now "imperative" for Britain to hold its resolve.



THE TORONTO STAR (CANADA)

Trenton commander faces murder charges

He was the model military man, rising quickly through the ranks and enjoying a 23-year career in which he brushed shoulders with top-level government and commanded one of Canada's most important military bases.

But on Monday, Col. Russell Williams' career took an unexpected turn when he appeared in a Belleville courtroom, shackled at the ankles and charged with the first-degree murders of two women.

Williams' arrest was the stunning culmination of a 10-day search for Jessica Lloyd, a 27-year-old woman from the Belleville area who vanished in late January. The 46-year-old colonel also has been charged in the death of Marie-France Comeau, a 37-year-old corporal found dead in November, as well as two counts of sexual assault in connection with two home invasions near Tweed, Ont., last September.

The news sent shock waves across the province, particularly in Trenton — where Williams took over as top commander of 8 Wing/CFB Trenton last July — and in the town of Tweed, where Williams owns a home and Lloyd also resided.

In Ottawa, the Canadian Armed Forces is scrambling to find an interim replacement for Williams, who has been removed from his position. For top military brass, having criminal charges laid against such a high-ranking officer is uncharted territory.



Rendition victim moves to sue U.S.

A Canadian man who was deported by U.S. officials to Syria, where he was imprisoned and allegedly tortured, has appealed a court ruling preventing him from suing the U.S.

Maher Arar filed a lawsuit before the U.S. supreme court on Monday, appealing a lower court ruling that rejected his case because it involved national security information.

Arar was arrested by U.S. authorities while transiting through New York's JFK International Airport in 2002, on his way home to Canada from a family vacation in Tunisia.

He was detained on information shared by Canadian police that suggested he had ties to "terrorist" groups.

Canadian commission eventually cleared him of any connections to "terrorist" organizations and concluded that he had been tortured.

He was awarded \$10.5m in compensation.

(Source: Al Jazeera)

Officials: Afghan avalanche kills 15, strands 100s

KABUL (AP) — Avalanches in a mountain pass north of Kabul have killed at least 15 people, injured more than 50 and left hundreds stranded on blocked roads, Afghan officials said Tuesday.

The avalanches took place Monday following heavy snows in the Salang Pass that links the Afghan capital with the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif and rescuers worked through the night to save more than 200 people, said Gen. Abdul Rahman Sayedkhalil, Parwan provincial police chief. He said 54 people were injured.

"It's very heavy snow. We're cleaning the roads. So far, we have found 15 bodies, including women and children, he said.

"There's still danger from avalanches there so that's why our work is a little slow," Rahman said.

About 100 Afghan soldiers were mobilized to join police and others in the rescue efforts, along with four helicopters, several ambulances and several bulldozers, Defense Ministry spokesman Gen. Mohammad Zahir Azimi said.

"Unfortunately there were more avalanches this morning which made our work a little difficult, but we are trying to rescue people," he said.

Military helicopters were dropping food packages to people stuck on snow-blocked roads, Interior Ministry spokesman Zemerai Bashary said.

Brown to face Iraq inquiry in early March

LONDON (AFP) — Prime Minister Gordon Brown will appear before the public inquiry into the Iraq war in early March, a spokesman for the probe said on Tuesday.

Brown was chancellor at the time of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, and is being called to give his account of the conflict several weeks after former premier Tony Blair gave his long-awaited evidence on January 29.

Inquiry chairman John Chilcot initially said he would not call Brown or any other serving ministers until after the general election, which must be held by early June at the latest, to avoid it dominating the political campaigns.