

Taliban fighters close in on western Afghan provincial city



HERAT, May 15

Taliban fighters with heavy weapons and night-vision equipment fought their way close to the centre of the western city of Farah on Tuesday, as Afghan government forces battled to keep control, officials and residents said. Residents of Farah, capital of the province of the same name, have warned for months the city was vulnerable and the attack appeared to threaten a repeat of the Taliban's capture of the northern city of Kunduz, which fell briefly in 2015.

"The Taliban are moving very fast, if the government does not take serious and speedy action, the province is going to collapse to Taliban," said Hamidullah, a resident of the city reached by telephone.

Residents said Taliban forces began their attack at around 2.00 a.m. (2130 GMT Monday) from several directions. Mohammad Radmanish, a spokesman for the defence ministry in Kabul, said security forces from neighbouring provinces had been ordered to Farah to protect civilians and government buildings and said the Taliban had been pushed out of the city.

"Fortunately, special forces and commandos are in the city and there is no danger of it falling," he said, adding that the Afghan air force was attacking Taliban positions. There were no immediate casualty assessments but residents said there were wounded and dead on both sides as well as among the civilian population. In one incident, at least 18 soldiers were killed by a suicide bomber in the Askarabad area of the city, Farid Bakhtawar, head of a provincial council said. However, Radmanish said only two soldiers were killed in the blast.

Officials said the insurgents were close to overrunning four police districts and the city's headquarters of the NDS, the main intelligence service, was under heavy attack. "Farah is in dire need of air support," Dadullah Qane, a provincial council member, said by telephone. "The Taliban are well equipped with heavy arms and night vision equipment."

"Right now there is heavy fighting close to the provincial governor's house and police headquarters has been under heavy attack for an hour," he said, adding that the provincial governor and other officials had left the city for a military base. Many officials, including the governor's spokesman, were not answering their telephones and it was not immediately possible to confirm the governor's whereabouts.

Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, a spokesman for the Taliban issued a statement warning civilians to remain in their houses.

"Mujahideen have nothing to do with civilians, only military positions are the target," he said, referring to Taliban fighters.

The fighting adds to the growing number of crisis points around Afghanistan since the Taliban began their annual spring offensive last month, including a series of deadly suicide attacks in the capital, Kabul.

Although the insurgents have been unable to take and hold any provincial centre, they are active across Afghanistan and the government has firm control over no more than 56 per cent of the country, according to U.S. estimates.

The United States has boosted its assistance to the government under a new strategy announced by President Donald Trump last year, sending thousands of additional troops and advisers and stepping up air strikes to support Afghan forces.

Although U.S. commanders have been relatively upbeat about improvements in the performance of Afghan forces, the Taliban appear to have made significant gains this year. Farah, a remote and sparsely populated province on the border with Iran, has seen months of heavy fighting, with hundreds of police and soldiers killed and severe losses inflicted even on elite special forces units. Farah residents have said Taliban forces were being supported by Iran. The governor of the province stepped down in January, denouncing worsening security and what he said was political interference and corruption.

Reuters

Fifty-five dead in Gaza protests as Israel fetes US Embassy move

GAZA CITY, May 16

In a jarring contrast, Israeli forces shot and killed at least 55 Palestinians and wounded more than 1,200 during mass protests Monday along the Gaza border, while just a few miles away Israel and the US held a festive inauguration ceremony for the new American Embassy in contested Jerusalem.

It was by far the deadliest day of cross-border violence since a devastating 2014 war between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers, and further dimmed the already bleak prospects for President Donald Trump's hoped-for peace plan.

Throughout the day, Gaza protesters set tires ablaze, sending thick plumes of black smoke into the air, and hurled firebombs and stones toward Israeli troops across the border. The Israeli military, which has come under international criticism for using excessive force against unarmed protesters, said Hamas tried to carry out bombing and shooting attacks under the cover of the protests and released video of protesters ripping away parts of the barbed-wire border fence.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and chief Mideast adviser, headlined the US delegation with his wife and fellow White House adviser, Ivanka Trump, as well as Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and four Republican senators. Republican super-donor Sheldon



added further fuel. There was barely any mention of the Gaza violence at Monday's lavish inauguration ceremony for the new embassy, an upgraded consular building located just 50 miles (80 kilometers) away. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other top officials joined an American delegation of Trump administration officials and Republican and evangelical Christian supporters.

But Monday's steadily climbing death toll and wall-to-wall condemnation of the embassy move in the Arab world raised new doubts about Trump's ambitions to broker what he called the "deal of the century." More than a year after taking office, Trump's Mideast team has yet to produce a long-

promised peace plan. Trump says recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital acknowledges the reality that Israel's government is located there as well as the ancient Jewish connection to the city. He insists the decision has no impact on future negotiations on the city's final borders.

To both Israel and the Palestinians, the American gesture is widely seen as siding with Israel on the most sensitive issue in their longstanding conflict. "What a glorious day. Remember this moment. This is history," Netanyahu told the inauguration ceremony. "You can only build peace on truth, and the truth is that Jerusalem has been and will always be the capital of the Jewish people, the capital of the Jewish state," he

added. The Palestinians, who seek east Jerusalem as their capital, have cut off ties with the Trump administration and say the US is unfit to serve as a mediator. Israel captured east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed the area in a move that is not internationally recognized.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, furious over the embassy ceremony, said he "will not accept" any peace deal proposed by the Trump administration. The Palestinian president also urged the international community to condemn what he said were "massacres" carried out by Israeli troops in Gaza, and officials said the Palestinians would file a war crimes complaint against Israel in the International Criminal Court over settlement construction. By nightfall, at least 55 Palestinians, including a young girl and four other minors, were killed, the Gaza Health Ministry said. It said 1,204 Palestinians were wounded by gunfire, including 116 who were in serious or critical condition.

Egypt, an important Israeli ally, condemned the killings of Palestinian protesters, while the UN human rights chief, Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini, decried the "shocking killing of dozens." Turkey said it was recalling its ambassador to the United States over the

US Embassy move, saying it "disregarded the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" and would "not serve peace, security and stability in the region." It also recalled its ambassador to Israel following what it called a "massacre" of Palestinians on the Gaza border.

South Africa, a fervent supporter of the Palestinians, also recalled its ambassador for consultations, the Israeli Foreign Ministry said. The European Union's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, called on Israel to respect the "principle of proportionality in the use of force" and show restraint, while also urging Hamas to ensure any protests remain peaceful.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres issued a similar appeal. At the US Embassy ceremony in Jerusalem, Kushner placed the blame on the Gaza protesters.

"As we have seen from the protests of the last month and even today those provoking violence are part of the problem and not part of the solution," he said. Israel says the blockade of Gaza, imposed by Israel and Egypt after Hamas overran the territory in 2007, is needed to prevent Hamas from building up its military capabilities. But it has decimated Gaza's economy, sending unemployment skyrocketing to over 40 pc.

Dismantling of North Korea nuclear site 'well under way': US monitor



SEOUL, May 15

Satellite photos indicate North Korea has begun dismantling its nuclear test site ahead of a historic summit between leader Kim Jong Un and President Donald Trump, a US monitor said today. In a move welcomed by Washington and Seoul, North Korea said at the weekend it will "completely" destroy the Punggye-ri test site, in a ceremony scheduled between May 23-25 in front of invited foreign media. But no observers from international atomic monitoring agencies have been invited, raising concerns over the openness of the process.

Punggye-ri, in the northeast of the country, has been the site of all six of the North's nuclear tests, the latest and by far the most powerful in September last year, which Pyongyang said was an H-bomb. North

Korea pledged to close the testing ground after Kim last month declared the country's nuclear force complete and said it had no further need for the complex.

The respected 38 North website said Tuesday that satellite images dated May 7 showed "the first definitive evidence that dismantlement of the test site was already well under way". Several key operational buildings as well as smaller sheds had been razed and rails connecting the tunnels to their waste piles were removed, the monitoring group said.

Excavation of a new tunnel has also been halted since late March, it added. Images showed preparatory work for the destruction ceremony had also begun, including a newly positioned foundation among the waste piles believed to have been built for the invited journalists. "It is conceivably for a future

camera position to record the closure of the West Portal," the group said.

However no tunnel entrances appear to have been permanently closed and some main buildings are still intact, it added, saying the destruction of those facilities was likely to be carried out in front of the foreign media.

Dialogue brokered by South Korea has seen US-North Korea relations go from trading personal insults and threats of war last year to a summit between Kim and Trump which will be held in Singapore on June 12. Kim's latest diplomatic overture has seen him hold a summit with the South's President Moon Jae-in and travel twice in less than two months to meet with Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

The two Koreas are due to meet for a high-level meeting on Wednesday to discuss follow-up measures from their summit last month, Seoul's unification ministry said. Washington is seeking the "complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation" of the North and stresses that verification will be key.

But sceptics warn that Pyongyang has yet to make any public commitment to give up its arsenal, which includes missiles capable of reaching the United States.

AFP

US criticizes China for shielding Myanmar from UN action

UNITED NATIONS, May 15

The United States indirectly criticized China on Monday for shielding Myanmar from strong UN Security Council action over a military crackdown against mainly Rohingya Muslims that the US and other countries have denounced as ethnic cleansing.

US Ambassador Nikki Haley did not mention China by name, but China proposed substantial amendments to a British-drafted Security Council statement on Myanmar last week. The 15-member council eventually agreed a weaker statement. The Security Council met on Monday to discuss a visit by envoys to Myanmar and Bangladesh two weeks ago.

Rohingya insurgent attacks on security posts in Myanmar's Rakhine state in August last year sparked a military operation that sent nearly 700,000 Rohingya fleeing to camps in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh.

"Some members of the council have kept us from taking action for cynical and self-interested reasons," Haley said. "Some undermined the unity of the council demonstrated during the trip with unhelpful edits that only weakened the council's message."

Speaking before Haley, China's UN Ambassador Ma Zhaoxun told the Security Council that Myanmar and Bangladesh should be encouraged to solve the crisis bilaterally to make sure it doesn't "drag on or become more complicated."

"The council should continue to encourage Myanmar and Bangladesh to increase consultations and cooperation for the early implementation of the bilateral arrangement," he said.

Myanmar and Bangladesh agreed in January to complete the voluntary repatriation of the refugees within two years but differences between the two sides remain and implementation of the plan has been slow.

Diplomats said Russia has also backed China in council discussions on Myanmar. Speaking after Haley, Russia's deputy UN Ambassador Dmitry Polyanskiy said the unity of the council on the issue was important and he hoped some members "will not fall prey to the temptation of using this situation to pursue their narrow, domestic political aims."

Fleeing refugees have reported killings, rapes and arson on a large scale. Myanmar denies ethnic cleansing and has said its operations in Rakhine were a legitimate response to attacks on security forces by Rohingya insurgents.

"The government of Myanmar has stated time and again that no violation of human rights will be condoned," Myanmar's UN Ambassador Hau Do Suan told council on Monday. "Allegations supported by evidence will be investigated and action taken in accordance with the law."

Reuters

China okays \$ 1 billion loan for Sri Lanka expressway

COLOMBO, May 15: China has approved a \$1 billion loan to revive a long-delayed expressway in central Sri Lanka, the island's government said on Monday. Construction of the first phase of the road linking the capital Colombo with the hill resort of Kandy had been delayed for more than two years due to a lack of foreign funding, according to local media reports. PM Ranil Wickremesinghe's office said he met the Chinese ambassador today, who told him Beijing had decided to approve the loan that will be provided through the Export-Import Bank of China.

China has emerged as the largest single lender to Sri Lanka in recent years, securing contracts to build roads, railways and ports under the former government of Mahinda Rajapakse. After Wickremesinghe came to power in January 2015, many projects were suspended pending investigations into corruption allegations, but construction work has recently restarted following renegotiations. Last August, China took over a loss-making deep-sea port in the island's south on a 99-year lease under a \$1.1 billion deal. Colombo is a key hub for Indian cargo, and Beijing has been accused of seeking to develop facilities around the Indian Ocean to counter the rise of its rival and secure its own economic interests.

AFP

China bans 'wrongly educated' India-trained monks

BEIJING, May 15: China has banned India-trained "wrongly educated" monks from teaching Buddhism, fearing they may be of "separatist" bent. The ban was imposed by a county in China's Southwest province in Sichuan, according to the state-run Global Times. Buddhism is one of the five officially recognised religions in China. China accuses Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama of secessionist activities in Tibet where most people follow Buddhism. The county Litang stages patriotic education classes every year for those educated and awarded Gexe Lharampa, the highest academic degree in Tibetan Buddhist studies in India, an official from Litang's ethnic and religious affairs bureau told the Global Times.

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