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Afghanistan

Eight people including a civilian killed in clashes in southern Afghanistan

Reports say at least eight people, including a civilian, were killed in two separate incidents in southern Afghanistan. Citing local Afghan officials, Reuters News is reporting that two Taliban fighters and two government soldiers were killed yesterday (Tuesday, May 18) in a clash in Mizan district of southeastern Zabul province. Two Taliban fighters, one Afghan policeman and a civilian driver were also killed in a separate clash in Waza Khaw district of neighboring Paktika province. Afghan insurgents have stepped up their attacks against the Afghan government and foreign presence in the country in recent months and ahead of the upcoming nationwide general elections in September. At least 700 people have reportedly been killed in violence since August last year.

http://abcnews.go.com/wire/World/reuters20040519_35.html

US orders review of its detention facilities in Afghanistan

The commander of US forces in Afghanistan, David Barno, has reportedly ordered a thorough review of US detention facilities in Afghanistan amid growing controversy over alleged prisoner abuse. Lieutenant Colonel Tucker Mansager, spokesman for the US military, told a press briefing in the Afghan capital Kabul today that General Barno has appointed a fellow general to conduct a "top to bottom" review of some 20 US detention facilities across Afghanistan. The general, whose name was not identified, would visit each of the detention facilities in Afghanistan and submit his findings to General Barno by mid-June (next month). Mansager said, "He [appointed general] will also ensure all facilities are adequate, and procedures are in accordance with the spirit of the Geneva Conventions and are being followed correctly and fully, and that staffing and capabilities are adequate to the task." He added that "portions" of the report would be made public. Mansager said that the military saw no reason to change its policy of granting access to prisoners only to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which currently has access to only the main detention facility at Bagram, located north of Kabul. He said General Barno has yet to decide on a request by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission seeking access to US detention facilities. Human rights groups have long raised concerns about the alleged abuse of prisoners held at a network of secretive US jails across Afghanistan. The military in the past has often dismissed such allegations. However, after the reports of prisoner abuses by US military personnel in Iraq surfaced in the media more than two weeks ago, US detention facilities are also drawing renewed attention. Separately, alleged Australian Taliban fighter David

Hicks is saying that he was abused during interrogation by the US military soon after he was captured in Afghanistan. Hicks is currently in US custody at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba along with some 700 other terror suspects.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/south_asia/3727733.stm

http://abcnews.go.com/wire/World/ap20040519_254.html

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/05/19/1084917657938.html>

East Timor

UN mission officially hands responsibility of policing and security to East Timor

Today, the United Nations Mission of Support in Timor-Leste (UNMISET) handed over official responsibility for policing and external security to East Timor's (Timor-Leste) fledgling government. "This is an historic occasion and an important milestone in Timor-Leste's history as an independent sovereign state," UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Special Representative Kamallesh Sharma said in a ceremony marking the handover today. East Timorese officials and departing UN police and peacekeeping commanders expressed confidence that the country's police and defense forces were up to the task. The mission in East Timor was extended by the UN Security Council last week until May 2005, contingent upon a review by the Council after six months. The Security Council last week said that personnel would be downgraded from around 3,000 to about 700 staff. The new downsized force would include up to 157 civilian police advisers, 58 civilian advisers, 42 military liaison officers, 310 troops and a 125-person International Response Unit. The UN administered the territory for three years after East Timorese voted for independence from Indonesia in 1999. The UN says that over 1,000 people were killed in the violence surrounding the election by pro-Jakarta militiamen allegedly backed by the Indonesian military. Much of East Timor's infrastructure was destroyed during the rampage.

<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/6686f45896f15dbc852567ae00530132/efe766cdd2b80e0f85256e990051f5c5?OpenDocument>

<http://asia.news.yahoo.com/040519/kyodo/d82lg5so0.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/05/19/1084917655857.html>

India

Drought continues to adversely affect southern Indian states; Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu offer new relief measures

According to a report by the NGO Action by Churches Together (ACT), a long-running drought continues to adversely affect large areas of the southern Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Drought has also affected the western state of Maharashtra. Despite a good monsoon last year, some of the areas experienced their fourth consecutive year of drought. The drought situation has been credited with bringing about the downfall of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party and its allies in the recent national elections, as the BJP largely ignored the plight of the rural poor. The drought also brought about the defeat of the progressive Telegu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, where several farmers have reportedly committed suicide over rising debt, prompting politicians to offer new relief measures to farmers. Tamil Nadu has been affected by drought for the third year in a row, and farmers do not see any hope of cultivating any significant crops for the June-September season this

year. The debt of farmers has been rising, forcing many of them migrate to cities in search of work. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha has restored free electricity supplies to farmers and removed an income ceiling required to receive food grains at subsidized prices after the defeat of her party in the recent elections. Nearby Karnataka is also facing a 3-year drought. Both surface and groundwater systems in the Cauvery basin have been severely depleted, also affecting Tamil Nadu as well. Kerala is experiencing one of its worst droughts in its history, as rainfall has decreased by nearly half from 1994 to 2003. In Andhra Pradesh, the fifth largest Indian state geographically and demographically, 23 districts have been declared drought-affected. Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister YS Rajasekhara Reddy yesterday unveiled a new compensation package for the families of indebted farmers who have committed suicide as well as measures to increase the pace of key irrigation projects. Finally, parts of Maharashtra state face their fourth consecutive year of drought. ACT says that part of the problem lies in decreasing water management strategies by state authorities.

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/fromthefield/108495671318.htm>
http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/181_764763.000900020004.htm
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/south_asia/3725231.stm

Indonesia



Indonesia officially downgrades martial law in Aceh province to state of civil emergency

Jakarta officially downgraded martial law in Aceh to a state of civil emergency today, returning control to a civilian governor. The change occurs on the one-year anniversary of the Indonesian military's operation to rid the province of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) rebels and the imposition of martial law. The operation has reportedly been the biggest military operation since the invasion of East Timor in 1975. Up to 40,000 troops were deployed in Aceh to fight a pre-operation estimate of some 5,000

rebels. The military said earlier this month that since the military operation started, some 1,963 GAM rebels have been killed, while another 2,100 rebels were arrested and another 1,276 have surrendered to authorities. Military spokesperson Yani Basuki said earlier this month that the military had probably underestimated the GAM's strength. Jakarta says that the success of the military has enabled the downgrading, however, observers say the GAM is still active in the province. "Now, we can see that the situation is different compared with one

year ago. The threat of the armed separatist group has been broken by the Indonesian military and police,” said President Megawati Sukarnoputri. The province will now be administered under governor Abdullah Puteh. Puteh says that he will work with an “assistance and monitoring” team from Jakarta and that he, Major General Endang Suwarya, the province's military chief, the provincial police chief, and attorney general, will make decisions together. The change to a civilian administration will give officials the power to impose a curfew or censor the press. The GAM has been fighting for an independent homeland since 1976. Some 12,000 people have died in the fighting since then.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3727445.stm>

<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/6686f45896f15dbc852567ae00530132/41635c3be815bc58c1256e990032226e?OpenDocument>

Nepal

Nepal's King Gyanendra agrees to meet with opposition party leaders

Nepal's King Gyanendra today agreed to meet with the leaders of the five main opposition parties in an effort to resolve the political deadlock in Nepal. The king and the leaders are expected to meet tonight (Wednesday, May 19). The five main parties have held daily protests for nearly the past two months. King Gyanendra assumed executive powers in October 2002, and since then, tens of thousands have marched in the streets to protest the monarchy and for the restoration of democracy. Gyanendra had offered to have separate talks with political party leaders, but the five-party alliance had insisted only on joint talks. Some of the major demands of the opposition parties include the restoration of democracy and the formation of an all-party government. Meanwhile, a Maoist-called general strike is reported to continue to disrupt normal life across the country, with most schools and major businesses and transport closed or at a standstill. Maoist rebels called a three-day general strike against the government that began on Tuesday (May 18). Today, a bomb, blamed on the rebels, went off at a roadside in the capital Kathmandu but did not injure anyone or cause any major damage. It is common for the Maoists to call for general strikes across the country, with most people abiding by the strikes because of fears of Maoist retaliation. Last week, the protesting political parties called for a two-day general strike that also put the country at a virtual standstill.

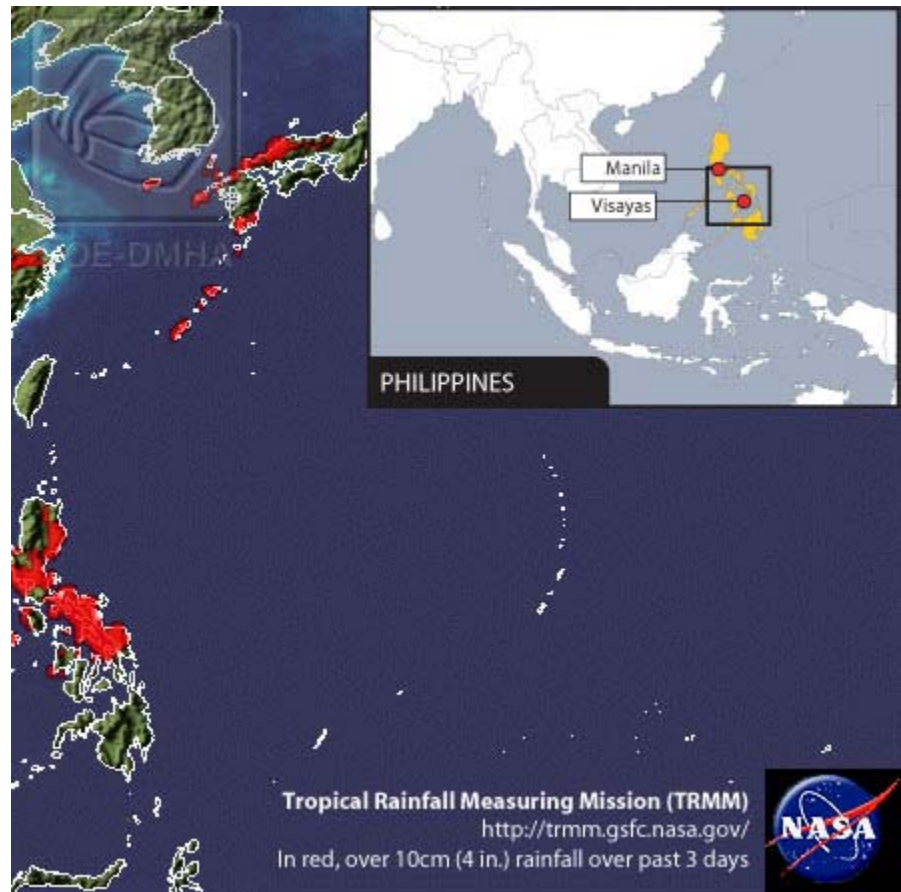
http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/181_766783.00050002.htm

http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/181_766970.00050002.htm

Philippines

Typhoon Nida claims the lives of at least 20 people, displaces more than 28,000 in the Philippines

Typhoon Nida (local name: Dindo) swept past the northern Philippines and headed northeast towards southern Japan, after causing damage and claiming at least 20 lives on the eastern areas of the Philippines' central Visayas and northern Luzon regions. The government reported more than 28,000 people were displaced by strong winds, floods, storm



surges and landslides, while 11 other people were missing. Most of the damage and the deaths occurred in the affected areas, as the typhoon swept up the eastern Philippines from Sunday (May 16) to Tuesday (May 18), reaching the super-typhoon level with maximum sustained winds of 173 mph (278 kph) at one point. At least 9 of the deaths occurred when a ferry overturned in the central Camotes islands. Seven people were killed in the Bicol region southeast of Manila, and 4 others were killed in the central Philippines. President Gloria Arroyo today placed eight eastern provinces under a state of calamity, enabling local officials to draw relief aid from emergency funds. According to the government's disaster response agency, hundreds of homes, mostly thatch huts, were destroyed by landslides and strong winds in central-eastern Catanduanes province, displacing about 700 families. The mayor of the mountainous town of Gigmoto in the province reportedly began distributing food and clothing items to displaced villagers. In northern Nueva Ecija province, nearly 3,000 people were evacuated and homes were destroyed in at least 7 villages. No other relief or rescue efforts were reported. The typhoon also stranded more than 15,000 ferry passengers across the affected regions. The civil defense office has said that initial damage estimates are at US\$1.3 million, with most of the damage to the agriculture sector. The typhoon is currently just south of Japan and currently has maximum sustained winds of 103 mph (167 kph), and is expected to reduce to 75 mph (120 kph) in the next 24 hours. Nida is the fourth typhoon to hit the Philippines this year. The Philippines' typhoon season runs from June to

October, but unseasonal storms are not uncommon. In November 1991, about 6,000 people were killed in the central island province of Leyte, when landslides and floods were triggered by a storm.

<https://metoc.npmoc.navy.mil/itwc.html>

<http://asia.news.yahoo.com/040519/ap/d82lkh201.html>

http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/view/85689/1/.html

<http://www.terradaily.com/200404519081438.8lvfo22o.html>

Thailand

Queen expresses concern over conflict in southern Thailand; Renewed violence claims 4 lives

Queen Sirikit of Thailand has made a rare comment to express concern over the recent outbreak of violence in southern Thailand in a letter conveyed to Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thailand's royal family is highly revered, but rarely makes comments that would be seen as political as the country is a constitutional monarchy. This is the second time that the royal family has broken their silence since the violence broke out in early January, claiming over 110 lives in scores of attacks, including the unprecedented killings of Buddhist monks. The violence intensified on April 28, when over 100 suspected militants were killed in various clashes with security forces in the region. The high death toll prompted domestic and international criticism on what was called heavy-handed tactics by security forces. At the beginning of this week, there were bomb blasts outside three Buddhist temples. A spokesperson for Thaksin said that the Queen has advised him to tell his cabinet that whatever measures are used to solve the crisis, the people must not be lead to believe that the crisis is based on religious differences. The royal family has espoused religious freedom in Buddhist majority Thailand. Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh said that the royal family made a financial contribution for the restoration of the historic Krue Sae mosque damaged in the April 28 clashes. In addition, Chularatchamontri Sawat Sumalayasak, Thailand's Islamic spiritual leader, is planning to send Muslim scholars to the three affected provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani, to teach the "correct version" of Islam. Chavalit said the government was working on inviting prominent Muslim scholars from various countries to the region. However, European diplomats last week said that they plan an informal fact-finding delegation to make their own assessments of the violence. Yesterday, the NGO Amnesty International expressed concerns on death threats made to human rights groups in the south. In addition, a government-sponsored investigation panel into the April 28 clashes has said that it will not able to meet its one-month deadline to finish its inquiry. Meanwhile, violence continued at an increased pace today in the worst violence since April 28. A group of villagers were sprayed with gunfire by unidentified gunmen in Narathiwat, killing 3 people. In a separate attack, a provincial employee in Pattani was shot dead by motorcycle assailants, in what is the usual form of deadly attacks in the region.

<http://asia.news.yahoo.com/040519/ap/d82lniao0.html>

http://www.bangkokpost.com/News/15May2004_news15.php

<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/page.news.php3?clid=3&id=113893&usrsess=1>

http://www.bangkokpost.com/News/15May2004_news21.php

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/asia-pacific/3728309.stm>