Afghan warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum steps down from his military position to run for President

Afghan warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek, has announced his plans to run for the president’s office in the upcoming presidential election scheduled for October 9. Dostum, who has been a military advisor to President Hamid Karzai, has reportedly stepped down from his military position to make a run at the political office. Dostum made the announcement yesterday (Thursday, July 22) at a large political rally in the northern city of Mazar-I-Sharif, shortly after turning in his resignation to President Karzai. Dostum is the first high-profile challenger to Karzai to surface in Karzai’s reelection bid as President. Monday (July 26) is the last day to file papers for candidacy and candidates are required to announce the names of their two vice presidents. Dostum has yet to name his selection for the vice presidents. Akbar Bai, a spokesman for Dostum, told the media that Dostum was unhappy with Karzai’s policies, which he felt were were detrimental to minority ethnic groups and favorable to Pashtuns. He blamed Karzai for applying the label of “warlords” to only non-Pashtun commanders and running an “unbalanced” campaign to disarm factional militias. Addressing his supporters at the rally, Dostum said, “Everyone has their dignity. I will defend your rights.” According to the BBC, it appears that Dostum’s decision to run for the president’s office is likely to bring the divisive issue of ethnicity to the forefront of the election campaign. Dostum’s decision to run against Karzai comes less than two weeks after Karzai said he would impose the toughest punishment yet against warlords that refuse to cooperate in the government’s disarmament campaign. Although Dostum is not likely to win against Karzai, he could possibly try to deprive Karzai of 50 percent of the votes, which is required to avoid a runoff vote.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3920236.stm

UN says Afghan voter registration climbs to 80 percent of eligible voters

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is reporting that Afghan voter registration has climbed to some 80 percent of an estimated 9.5 million eligible Afghan voters. Manoel de Almeida e Silva, spokesman for UNAMA, told a press briefing in the Afghan capital Kabul yesterday (Thursday, July 22) that as of Tuesday (July 20), Afghan voter registration had reached 7,836,281 with men and women accounting for 59.2 percent (4,637,499) and
40.8 percent (3,198,782), respectively, of all registered voters. He said an estimated 2.3 million Afghan eligible voters in Pakistan and Iran would also be able to take part in the upcoming presidential elections in October and the parliamentary election in April 2005. He added that separate memorandums of understanding had already been signed by Iran and Pakistan that would allow out of country voter registration and polling. Almeida e Silva said despite an increase in the number of registered people, UNAMA was concerned about uneven registration in some areas, especially in the south. He also noted that voter registration for women in some areas of the country, especially the south, was half (20 percent) of the national average of 40 percent. To address the situation, a delegation from the Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB) which included Dr. Farooq Wardak, the director of the electoral secretariat, and Professor Reginald Austin, the chief technical advisor, went to the south and reportedly met with the governors of Kandahar, Helmand, Nimroz and Zabul provinces, as well as security officials and representatives of the US-led coalition force. The lack of security, a lower literacy rate among women and an insufficient number of educated women to help with the registration process were identified as key problems in the south. It is important to note that officials had earlier estimated the number of eligible voters to number around 10.5 million, however, last month these estimates were revised downward to some 9.5 million voters.

Asia

Thailand announces new bird flu outbreaks in north; Indonesia says it will launch major vaccination program

Thailand today announced that it has confirmed new bird flu cases in the northern province of Phitsanulok, located some 208 miles (335 kilometers) north of Bangkok. The announcement brings the total amount of provinces in Thailand affected by bird flu to some 16. The government has so far culled more than 120,000 chicken and ducks over the past month in an effort to contain the outbreak. The government has also ordered the culling of birds on farms where 10 percent or more birds have died “mysteriously.” Officials will also take random blood samples of chickens at farms across the country by the end of the month. Meanwhile, Indonesia says it has launched a major vaccination program to help eradicate bird flu in the country. Indonesia’s agriculture ministry says that the bird flu killed some 3,161 birds in three districts on Java Island in May and killed another 1,760 in June in another district in Java. The Director of animal health at the ministry, Tri Satya Putri Naipospos, says that infections had occurred only in areas previously affected by an earlier outbreak this year. Early this year, 10 Asian countries battled bird flu outbreaks, and around 100 million chickens died from the virus or were culled by governments hoping to halt the disease. In Thailand and Vietnam, the virus made the jump from birds to humans, and 24 people died from the disease. “The scale is small and we can’t say it’s a new epidemic. Avian influenza is not easy to control because without strict biosecurity the virus will not disappear. It’s a natural phenomenon in the course of
Bangladesh

One-third of Bangladesh’s capital, Dhaka, submerged by floodwaters; Government refuses international aid, declines to declare national disaster

According to the UN News Center today, unusually heavy monsoon floods have now affected over 30 million people across South Asia, from 20 million previously reported. In Bangladesh, nearly 20 million people have been affected, as more than half of the country has been submerged. Although the Flood Warning and Forecasting Center (FFWC) in Dhaka said floodwaters have begun to recede slightly in the worst-hit northeast, they continue to affect Dhaka and the central regions. The airport in northeastern Sylhet district, the third largest in the country, has partially reopened. However, the Water Board in Dhaka has warned that it has been unable to pump out storm and sewage waters, endangering the city of 10 million. One-third of Dhaka is reportedly underwater and levels are expected to increase. The UN World Food Program (WFP) has also expressed concerns about an upcoming high tide in the Bay of Bengal expected in early August. However, the government today declined to declare a national disaster and reportedly refused official international aid. International NGOs are already providing relief in the country. Bangladeshi Disaster Management and Relief Minister Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf reportedly told the BBC that food supplies were sufficient. He added that Dhaka would ask for international post-crisis help to build shelters in the north and northeast. “We can’t take [international relief] as [it] tarnishes the national image,” he said. The government has so far distributed 15,250 tons of rice. WFP says it has finished distributing biscuits in the north, and is preparing to hand out rice in the north and central regions, while the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) has released an appeal for US$3.2 million. The NGO, Care International, said today that it has distributed food to the northeast. The NGO, Christian Aid, reports that flood damage is likely to be serious and long-term due to major erosion, which has badly affected agricultural land. Food for Hungry International
(FHI) is also assisting in the northeast and north, while World Vision says that it has begun relief in its affected program areas. The FFWC said floods in the northeast should continue to improve slightly. Northern districts, such as Gaibandha and Pabna, and central districts, such as Naryanganj, as well as Dhaka city are likely to continue to worsen as waters from northern areas run downstream to the Bay of Bengal.

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India

At least 11.5 million people now affected by heavy monsoon floods in India’s northeast Assam and Bihar states

Heavy monsoon floods have now affected over 30 million people across South Asia, from 20 million previously reported, according to the UN News Center today. In northeast India, where the death toll has risen to over 300 (from 277 yesterday), more than 7,000 villages have been affected in Bihar state. At least 11.5 million people have been displaced in Bihar and nearby Assam state. The UN Development Program (UNDP) reports that 380,000 people are currently living in temporary relief camps. The military is reportedly continuing airdrops due to the disruption of road and communication networks. Prime Minister Mammoth Singh is scheduled to tour Bihar on July 27, after visiting Assam earlier this week. In Assam, the capital of Guwahati continued to be flooded by the Brahmaputra River, which has been flowing at unprecedented levels in what has been described as the worst floods in 25 years. “Our basic infrastructure has totally collapsed, disrupting normal life and affecting relief and
rescue operations all over the state," said Assam Public Works Minister Bhumidhar Burman. The UNDP reports that all 27 districts of Assam have now been affected. Heavy rains have also been reported over neighboring Arunachal Pradesh state to the north. The NGO, World Vision, reports it is distributing relief supplies to the affected districts of Dhemaji, Amri and Udalguri in Assam. World Vision Community Development Organizer David Dutta said that the number of relief camps has increased in Dhemaji in the last two days and nearly 150 camps have now been set up. The NGO has also assisted nearly 6,000 people in Assam. The Central Water Commission reported today that most rivers in Assam should begin to recede.

http://www.reliefweb.int
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South Asia

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh hold informal meeting

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh today held talks for the first time in the latest in a series of informal meetings between top Indian and Pakistani officials. Both leaders expressed a continued commitment to the peace process, which began with a landmark agreement to hold composite peace dialogue earlier this year. "No aspect of our relationship, including Jammu and Kashmir, was left out of our warm, frank and realistic discussions," said Singh in a statement after meeting with Musharraf. Singh was in Islamabad to attend a summit of the South Asian Association for Cooperation (SAARC) in Islamabad earlier this week, and had stayed on to hold a meeting with new Pakistani Prime Minister Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain and Musharraf. Earlier, he had informally met with the Pakistani counterpart, Khurshid Kasuri, on the sidelines of the summit. "It is important to address [Kashmir] with sincerity with a view to reaching a final settlement that accorded fully with the legitimate aspirations of the Kashmiris within a reasonable timeframe," said Musharraf's statement after meeting with Singh. Despite positive signs of progress, the long-running Kashmir dispute remains by far the largest obstacle in the peace process. Pakistan has said that it prefers to keep the Kashmir issue at the forefront of discussions, while India has said that it prefers to resolve other disputes first. "While progress in some areas can and perhaps will be rapid...in certain other areas, notably Kashmir, it is still not set for any tangible results in the near future," said former Pakistani Foreign Secretary Tanvir Ahmed Khan. The two countries are due to hold six rounds of CBM (confidence-building measures) talks over the next month or so, before Singh meets formally with Kasuri in early September.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3919455.stm
http://www.abcnews.go.co./wire/World/reuters20040723_110.html
Sri Lanka

Close to one thousand victims of ethnic riots in 1983 compensated by Sri Lankan government; President Kumaratunga urges apologies from perpetrators of violence to allow nation to move forward towards peace
A ceremony was held today in Sri Lanka’s central city of Kandy for the compensation payment of some 937 victims of violence on the 21st anniversary of the ethnic riot which plunged the island nation into civil war. The Sri Lankan government recently announced that victims of the July 1983 ethnic riots between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils would receive compensation. Today, Kumaratunga said that all those responsible for the riots should apologize if the country is to move forward in the peace process. “We should apologize to each other. There should be a public apology. It is only then that we can get the burden off our shoulders and take the country forward,” Kumaratunga was quoted by the Daily News while addressing the ceremony. More than 64,000 have been killed in the civil war after nearly two decades of fighting. The government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire in February 2002, that has largely held despite the Tigers dropping out of peace talks in April 2003.

Thailand

Troops brace for further attacks; Queen Sirikit to visit southern Thailand; Soldier, village chief killed in continuing violence
According to the Straits Times yesterday, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said that security forces are now bracing themselves for another major attack in the southern region after intelligence reported that concerted attacks could occur next week. According to the intelligence reports, about 3,000 people were planning attacks from July 23 – 31. However, no other details were given. Meanwhile, Queen Sirikit today said that she plans to continue her annual visit to the region in September despite the continued violence, since she has always had concerns about the south. On August 2, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn is scheduled to visit southern Yala province. Earlier this week, the top spiritual Muslim leader in Thailand, Sawasdir Sumalyasak, the Chularatchamontri, called for the southern people to help restore peace in honor of the royal family during a visit to the south earlier this week. The Royal Family has reportedly launched more than 3,000 development projects for Muslims in south, as part of its extensive list of projects nationwide, and has kept a royal palace in the south to stay in touch with the region. Many royal and government projects were launched to help neutralize the southern communist and Muslim insurgencies in the 1970's and 80's. Although Thailand is a constitutional monarchy, the royal family is highly revered in the country. Meanwhile, violence continued in the south as a soldier was shot dead in a gun battle in Yala province, and another injured in a separate incident in Narathiwat province. Yesterday, the throat of a village chief was slit and a soldier was shot dead in Yala, while a policeman was injured by a motorcycle assailant in Pattani province. Village chiefs have been targeted because they often act as mediators
between officials and villagers unwilling to deal directly with authorities. The tiny Muslim minority in the south has often complained of discrimination and marginalization by Bangkok in the 94% Buddhist country. Over 310 people, mostly government employees, civil servants, police and soldiers, have been killed in nearly daily violence since it first broke out in early January this year.

http://www.nationmultimedia.com/page.news.php3?clid=3&id=117798&amp;usrsess=1
http://asia.news.yahoo.com/040722/ap/d83vn9io2.html

Other World News

United Nations

New UN Human Rights Commissioner says most vulnerable are her top priority
Yesterday, Louise Arbour, the new United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, put protecting the rights of the most vulnerable people as the top priority of her work, the UN News Centre reports. Arbour took up her new position at the beginning of the month. The Rights chief told a press conference in Geneva that the UN’s Human Rights Office “would come to the aid of the very poor, the imprisoned, the disenfranchised, the targets of intolerance and hatred through the solid legal and institutional framework of human rights protection and promotion that the UN has built up during 60 years of work,” the News Centre reports. “Now we have the opportunity to actually put that framework to work for people, for each individual right holder,” Arbour said. The High Commissioner notes that in an age of human rights consciousness, the world was daily witnessing atrocities with passive acceptance or at the instigation of “powerful people.” In related news, senior human rights official, Bertrand Ramcharan says in a report that organizations that put human rights at the core of their mandate are more effective when assisting governments. In a report to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Ramcharan calls for the integration of human rights through the UN system “with the ultimate objective of assisting Member States, at their request, in developing their national systems for the promotion and protection of human rights.” Ramcharan’s report suggests that ECOSOC should periodically review progress made in making human rights an essential part of UN programs.