

Anti-U.S. demonstrators killed in protests

By Stephen Graham
AP Writer

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) - Afghans enraged by the alleged desecration of Islam's holy book at a U.S. prison staged a third day of violent protests Thursday, burning an American flag in the capital and ransacking relief group offices to the south as demonstrations spread to neighboring Pakistan.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice promised "appropriate action" would be taken if the allegations are proven true.

Three more demonstrators were shot and killed in clashes with police, officials said, bringing the death toll to at least seven in the biggest anti-American protests in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 - and presenting a fresh challenge to efforts to stabilize the country.

While most of the protesters were students, officials suggested that elements opposed to Afghanistan's U.S.-backed government were stirring the violence, which has also targeted American troops and the United Nations.

The demonstrations could complicate President Hamid Karzai's plans to ask for military aid on a trip to Washington this month, a prospect that has stoked a previously muted debate on how long U.S. troops should stay to secure the country, still riven by a Taliban-led rebellion. That debate may play out in parliamentary elections this year.

The Afghan leader, on a trip to Europe, has played down the violence as the growing pains of Afghan democracy.

The trigger of the unrest was a brief report in the May 9 edition of Newsweek magazine that interrogators at the U.S. prison on Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, placed Qurans in washrooms to unsettle suspects, and in one

case "flushed a holy book down the toilet."

Desecration of the Quran is punishable by death in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, but diplomats and officials have been taken aback by the intense reaction - further enflamed by bloodshed in a police crackdown on anti-U.S. protesters in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad on Wednesday that left four dead

Newsweek report, giving the article wider play in the region's media than the Al-Jazeera interview may have received last year.

At the Pentagon, Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Thursday that U.S. commanders in Afghanistan believe that local political factions - and not the reports about the alleged desecration - are driving

attacks, are given Qurans, prayer beads and time to pray.

"Disrespect for the Holy Quran is not now, nor has it ever been, nor will it ever be tolerated by the United States," Rice said in a statement to a Senate appropriations subcommittee.

"Our military authorities are investigating these allegations fully," she said. "If they are proven true, we will take appropriate

said were armed.

However, Interior Ministry spokesman Latufallah Mashal said two people died. Mashal said a third protester was killed in a separate clash with police in Wardak province, south of Kabul. He provided no details.

In neighboring Logar province, CARE International, one of the largest international relief groups in Afghanistan, said students attacked its office, thumping one staff member over the head with a piece of wood and trashing two computers. Another foreign relief group office next door was reportedly set ablaze.

"It's the symbols of this change in Afghanistan" that have been singled out, said Paul Barker, the country director for CARE. "There are probably people around the country inciting this."

In the capital, more than 200 young men gathered in front of Kabul University chanting "Death to America!" and carrying banners including one saying: "Those who insult the Quran should be brought to justice."

About two dozen students clambered onto the roof of a nearby building and burned an American flag to applause and cries of "God is great!" from the crowd below. Dozens of police - some armed with sticks, others with assault rifles - looked on.

Demonstrations also broke out in Pakistan, where more than 200 supporters of a radical Islamic group rallied in the northwestern city of Peshawar, and demanded that the United States offer an apology.

"This insulting of the Quran is a shameful act. It has torn to bits America's claims of being an enlightened country," said Abdul Jalil Jan, one of the organizers.

Peaceful demonstrations also have been reported in at least five other Afghan provinces and the Pakistani cities of Islamabad and Quetta. A larger demonstration in Pakistan was planned for Friday.



Photo courtesy of reuters.com

A soldier ducks behind a small wall to shield himself from the protestors' debris at the recent demonstration.

and over 70 wounded.

It was unclear why demonstrations broke out this week and not after previous media reports. In July 2004, for example, the Arab station Al-Jazeera ran an interview with a former Guantanamo detainee who claimed he saw a U.S. soldier stomp on the Quran and that another American soldier in the southern city of Kandahar threw a holy book into the toilet.

Pakistan protested to the U.S. government last weekend about the alleged abuse cited in the

the violence in Jalalabad.

Myers said the military is investigating the allegation but so far has not been able to confirm it. In one case, an inmate, in an act of defiance, ripped pages out of his Quran and stuffed them into the toilet in an attempt to back up the plumbing, Myers said, citing logs from the prison.

U.S. officials tried again Thursday to calm tempers, promising a thorough probe and insisting all inmates at Guantanamo, many of them Pakistanis and Afghans

captured after the Sept. 11

action. Respect for the religious freedom for all individuals is one of the founding principles of the United States. ... I am asking that all of our friends reject incitement to violence by those who would mischaracterize our intentions."

In Thursday's bloodiest incident, police fired on hundreds of anti-U.S. demonstrators in the town of Khogyani to prevent them from going to Jalalabad, 20 miles to the north, said police chief Maj. Gul Wali.

Wali counted three deaths among the protesters, who he

Nine killed in eastern Uzbekistan

By Bagilla Bukharbayeva
AP Writer

ANDIJAN, Uzbekistan (AP) - Outrage over the terror trial of 23 Muslims exploded into broader unrest in eastern Uzbekistan on Friday when armed protesters stormed a jail to free defendants, clashing with police in violence that brought thousands of protesters into the streets. At least nine people were killed and dozens wounded, witnesses and officials said.

One protester, who put the death toll as high as 20, said 30 soldiers were being held hostage because they were shooting at demonstrators. Two of the dead were children, Sharif Shakirov, a brother of one of the defendants told The Associated Press.

President Islam Karimov and other top officials rushed to the eastern city of Andijan, where the government insisted it remained in control despite the chaos, though it blocked foreign news reports for its domestic audience.

The unrest prompted neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, former Soviet republics like Uzbekistan, to seal their borders.

"The people have risen," said Valijon Atakhonjonov, a brother of another one of the defendants.

Karimov's office said nine people were killed and 34 wounded in clashes between protesters and security forces.

Armed protesters stormed the prison early Friday, officials and witnesses said. All 23 defendants - prominent businessmen accused of terror ties and Islamic extremism - were freed, said defendant Abdvosid Egomov, 33.

Egomov, pale and thin, was holed up in a local government compound that had been overrun by protesters, who were breaking up pavement stones to reinforce a metal fence surrounding the compound, to stave off security forces.

"We are not going to overthrow the government. We demand economic freedom," Egomov told The Associated Press.

"If the army is going to storm, if they're going to shoot, we are ready to die instead of living as we are living now. The Uzbek people have been reduced to living like dirt," Egomov said.

The protesters say the trial, which has provoked one of the biggest backlashes against the authoritarian government, is part of a broad government crackdown on religious dissent.

Thousands of Muslims have been jailed in Uzbekistan over the past few years in a government campaign that critics say has affected many innocent believers and only inflamed anger against Karimov's harsh rule.

In the capital, Tashkent, on Friday a suspected suicide bomber was shot and killed outside the Israeli Embassy on Friday morning, according to the U.S. Embassy, but it was unclear if the incident had any link to the unrest in Andijan.

Uzbekistan emerged as a key U.S. ally after the Sept. 11 attacks, and hosts hundreds of U.S. troops.

The men, arrested in June, are accused of being members of the Akramia religious group and having contacts with the outlawed radical Islamic party Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Authorities accuse Hizb-ut-Tahrir of inspiring terror attacks in Uzbekistan last year that killed more than 50. The group, which claims to eschew violence, denied responsibility.

Akramia unites followers of jailed Uzbek Islamic dissident Akram Yuldashev, who was accused of calling for the overthrow of the predominantly Muslim country's secular government - an accusation he denies.

The group's members are considered the backbone of Andijan's small business community, giving employment to thousands of people in the impoverished and densely populated Fergana Valley.

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Pope invites countries without diplomatic relations with Vatican to establish ties

By The Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) - Pope Benedict XVI reached out on Thursday to countries that don't have diplomatic relations with the Vatican, inviting them to establish ties with the Holy See.

Benedict didn't name the countries, saying only that he appreciated messages that came from some of them following the death of Pope John Paul II and his election as pope. China, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam are among the countries that don't have relations with the Vatican.

Benedict made the comments in a speech to diplomats accredited to the Holy See, his first since being elected pope on April 19. He delivered his speech in French - the language of diplomacy - to representatives of the 174 countries with which the Vatican has relations, in a ceremony in the Sala Regia of the Apostolic Palace.

"I'm thinking also about the nations with which the Holy See still hasn't entered into diplomatic relations," Benedict told the ambassadors, many in formal dress with sashes and medals on their chests.

He said he appreciated the fact that some of these countries sent messages to the Vatican following the death of John Paul II and after his election.

"I want to express my gratitude and address a deferential greeting to the civil authorities of these countries, expressing the wish to see them soon represented at the Apostolic See," he said.

China didn't send any official condolences to the Vatican following John Paul's death, but

Premier Wen Jiabao did say on April 21 that China was willing to build relations with the Vatican if Benedict breaks ties with rival Taiwan.

Beijing's communist government ordered Chinese Catholics to break ties with the Vatican in 1951. Roman Catholic churches in China are run by a government-sanctioned group that recognizes the pope as a spiritual leader but has no formal relations with the Vatican and appoints its own priests and bishops.

The Vatican is the only European government that has official relations with Taiwan. China still claims the self-ruled island as its territory and refuses to have any official contact with governments that recognize its rival as a sovereign country.

Benedict told the ambassadors he was particularly in favor of supporting dialogue to end conflicts, and recalled his own experience growing up in wartime Germany.

"For my part, I come from a country where peace and fraternity are dear to the heart of all the people," he said, "notably for those who like me knew war and the separation of brothers from one nation for the sake of devastating and inhuman ideologies."

DID YOU KNOW?

Pope John Paul II was elected to the papacy in October 1978.