

Hundreds of oil workers held a third day of protests in the capital of Kazakhstan's western oil-producing region on Monday, after at least 15 people were killed in the Central Asian state's deadliest riots in decades.

NATO Defiant on Afghan Night Raids

NATO will continue to carry out nighttime kill-and-capture raids that target suspected insurgents despite repeated protests by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the alliance said on Monday.

Spokesman Brig. Gen. Carsten Jacobson said that Afghan special forces, however, now take part in nearly all night raids and their participation is constantly increasing, AP reported.

The raids have become a flash point for anger over foreign meddling in Afghanistan and whether detention operations will be run by the Afghans or Americans. Karzai has demanded that foreign troops stop entering homes, saying Afghan citizens cannot feel secure if they think armed soldiers might burst into their houses in the middle of the night.

Jacobson countered that the raids remain the safest form of operation to take out insurgent leaders. They account for less than 1 percent of civilian casualties, and in 85 percent of cases no shots are fired, he said.

Last month, Karzai convened a traditional national assembly known as a Loya Jirga that stopped short of demanding a



complete end to night raids. Instead, it asked that they be led and controlled by Afghan security forces—a demand that the US says it has met.

"President Karzai has asked foreign troops to (refrain) from entering Afghan homes and this is exactly where ... 'Afghanization' comes in," Jacobson said, referring to the gradual transfer of responsibility for security to the Afghan army and police. They are due to assume full control

in 2014, when foreign forces are to end their combat role in Afghanistan.

Adm. William McRaven, who leads the U.S. Special Operations Command, said last week that about 2,800 raids were carried out against insurgent targets in the past year.

But some analysts have questioned the military and political value of the operations, saying that when guerrilla commanders are taken out they are usually replaced by younger and more aggressive fighters less disposed to making any compromise with the government.

Italians Strike Over Austerity Plan

Thousands of civil servants including hospital workers went on strike Monday to protest against the austerity plan of the new government led by Prime Minister Mario Monti.

Demonstrations were planned in several cities including Rome, where the unions was to rally outside parliament.

Last week the measures were approved by parliament and are expected to pass through the Senate before Christmas, AP reported.

But many Italians are unhappy about what they see as unfair cuts, putting the weight of the austerity on the poorer and elderly citizens. "The employees now pay several times the effects of the economic package that the government is trying to impose," said striker Silvia Benvenuti.

Meanwhile, on Monday the Milan stock market opened negative after the news that the Fitch ratings agency could downgrade Italy's credit rating again.

The Italian spread rose to above 500 points and this shows a fear on the side of the markets the deterioration of the credit



rating," explained Edoardo Liuni from Trading Room Roma.

The unions called for "radical changes" to the plan to make it more equitable and not rest only "on the shoulders of workers and pensioners" but target "tax cheats and the very wealthy."

But Monti has said there was "very little" room for maneuver.

Italian lawmakers formally adopted the measures last Friday with a view to balancing the budget by 2013 in

order to reassure the markets.

The plan—the third put forward since the summer—calls for heavy sacrifices through pension reforms and the reinstatement of a property tax on principal residences that was abolished in 2008. Last Monday saw a three-hour work stoppage by private sector workers.

Coming just a week after EU leaders struck a deal they thought would contain the continent's debt crisis, that and other negative news dashed hopes of an end to the turmoil endangering the euro—the currency used by 17 European nations—and threatening the entire global economy.

In Focus

Kim Jong-il Dies

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The announcement of Kim's death prompted South Korea to place its military on emergency alert, while shares on the stock market in Seoul fell nearly five per cent amid uncertainty over the stability of the secretive nuclear-armed nation.

South Korea's government called an emergency national security council meeting, and the country's central bank and market regulators also announced emergency meetings.

> Reactions

The White House said President Barack Obama had been notified of the reports of Kim's death and it was closely monitoring and in touch with South Korea and Japan.

The United States was committed to stability on the Korean peninsula as well as to its allies, the White House press secretary said.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda told ministers at a special security meeting to prepare for the unexpected, including on border affairs. Japan's top government spokesman said.

China, North Korea's only major ally, expressed grief and offered condolences.

Market players and regional powers will be on edge over what might happen next in the isolated state.

Asian stocks and US index futures fell, with South Korean shares tumbling as much as 5 percent, and the dollar gained after the announcement. The Korean won fell 1.8 percent. Russia on Monday sent condolences on the death of Kim Jong-il, who visited Siberia in the summer in a rare trip to one of the Stalinist's state's few allies.

Kim is believed to have suffered a stroke in 2008 but appeared relatively vigorous in photos and video from recent trips to China and Russia and in numerous trips around the country carefully documented by state media.

But the leader, reputed to have had a taste for cigars, cognac and gourmet cuisine, was believed to have had diabetes and heart disease.

"Just a couple of days ago, it was publicized that he was visiting a military installation," Don Kirk of the Christian Science Monitor said.

"Obviously there will be a long period of public mourning in the country, but the sense is that at least he organized his succession with [his son] Kim Jong-un taking over," he said.

Footage broadcast on CCTV, China's main news agency, showed interviews with North Koreans barely able to contain their grief.

An autopsy was performed on Sunday, and the North declared a period of national mourning from December 17 to 29. The KCNA news agency said that Kim's funeral would take place on December 28.

Furthermore, North Korea test-fired a short-range missile into the sea early Monday, the South Korean news agency Yonhap reported, hours after it announced the death of its leader Kim Jong-il.

Kim took power in 1949 upon the death of his father, Kim Il-sung, who had led North Korea since the Korean peninsula was split in half by the Korean War. Although the two sides signed a ceasefire in 1953 but they remain technically at war.

While Kim Il-sung retained the title of "Eternal President", Kim took the posts of chairman of the national defense commission, commander of the Korean People's Army and head of the ruling Worker's Party.

He faithfully carried out his father's policy of "military first", devoting much of the country's scarce resources to its troops—even as his people suffered from a prolonged famine—and built the world's fifth-largest military.

Kim also sought to build up the country's nuclear arms arsenal, which culminated in North Korea's first nuclear test explosion, an underground blast conducted in October 2006. Another test came in 2009.



Pakistanis Rally Against US

About 30,000 Islamists staged a protest on Sunday to condemn the United States and show support for Pakistan's military, which has asserted itself after a cross-border NATO attack and a controversial memo that has weakened the civilian government.

Pakistan's military was humiliated by the unilateral US special forces raid that killed Osama bin Laden in a Pakistani town in May, facing unprecedented public criticism.

But many Pakistanis rallied behind it after a November 26 cross-border NATO air raid killed 24 Pakistani soldiers, and plunged already troubled ties with Washington to a low point.

"The Islamists" show of support for the military will bring more pressure on Pakistan's civilian leaders, especially President Asif Ali Zardari, who could be damaged by a memo, allegedly crafted by the former US ambassador to the United States, accusing the military of plotting a coup.

"All Islamist organizations stand with the Pakistan army. We will stand together and defeat any conspiracies against Pakistan and the Pakistan army," said cleric Tahir Ashrafi.

"Long live the Pakistan army," chanted the Islamists in the central city of Lahore.

No evidence has emerged that the military was plotting a coup and the Pentagon at the time dismissed the memo as not credible. Army chief General Ashfaq Kayani has called for an investigation into the memo. On Monday, Pakistan's Supreme Court is due to start hearings into a petition demanding an inquiry into



Pakistanis protest against the US and show support for military on Dec 18.

who was behind it.

Tension between Pakistan's civilian government and military have bedeviled the nuclear-armed South Asian country for almost its entire existence, with the military ruling the country for more than

half of its 64-year history after a series of coups.

Haqqani's resignation was seen by many analysts as further weakening the civilian government, which is already beset by allegations of corruption and in-

competence.

The military, which determines security and foreign policy, dismisses any suggestion that it might stage a coup but analysts say military intervention could not be ruled out in the event of chaos.

106 Journalists Killed In 2011

At least 106 journalists were killed in 2011, among them 20 who reported on the Arab spring uprisings, a campaign group said on Monday.

More than 100 others were attacked, intimidated, arrested and wounded in countries including Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen, the Geneva-based Press Emblem Campaign said.

Mexico and Pakistan were the most dangerous countries to work in however.

The PEC said 12 journalists died in Mexico, likely victims of the ongoing conflict between the military and drug cartels in the north of the country.

"The casualties could be higher if figures were known for journalists who were victims of enforced disappearances," the group said in a statement.

Pakistan came second with 11 jour-

nalists killed, the majority of whom died on the border with Afghanistan, followed by Iraq, Libya and the Philippines.

Seven journalists were killed in the conflict which saw the toppling of strongman Colonel Muammar Gaddafi earlier this year.

Two thirds of the journalists killed were intentionally targeted, the PEC said, particularly in Latin America where the body said press freedom was threatened.

Others were accidentally killed during demonstrations, in fights, in suicide bombings or in mine explosions.

"There are half a dozen cases worldwide where the causes leading to the death of journalists are still unclear," said secretary General Blaise Lempen.

The toll was down one on 2010 when 105 journalists were killed.

Europe Accused of CIA Flights Cover-up

A majority of 28 mostly European countries have failed to comply with freedom of information requests about their involvement in secret CIA flights carrying suspected terrorists, two human rights groups said on Monday.

London-based Reprieve and Madrid-based Access Info Europe accused European nations of covering up their complicity in the so-called "extraordinary rendition" program by failing to release flight-traffic data that could show the paths of the planes, AP reported.

The groups said only seven of 28 countries had supplied the requested information. Five countries said they no longer had the data, three refused to release it and 13 had not replied more than 10 weeks after the requests were made.

Europe's silence is in contrast to the United States, which handed over Fed-

eral Aviation Administration records with data on more than 27,000 flight segments.

The groups' report said that the US had provided "by far the most comprehensive response" and accused European countries of lagging behind when it came to transparency.

"Is it an access to information problem, or is it a problem with this particular issue? It's a bit of both," said Access Info Europe executive director Helen Darbishire. "European countries have not completely faced up to their role here."

Human rights campaigners have worked for years to piece together information on hundreds of covert flights that shuttled suspected terrorists between CIA-run overseas prisons and the US military base at Guantanamo Bay as part of the post-Sept. 11 "War on Terror".