

THE WORLD; 3 Die in Afghans' Anti-U.S. Protests

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Three people were killed and dozens were wounded in anti- American demonstrations Thursday, the third day of protests that followed reports of interrogators desecrating copies of Islam's holy book at the U.S. detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Newsweek magazine recently reported that U.S. interrogators at Guantanamo in at least one instance flushed a copy of the Koran down a toilet. Pakistan has formally protested the alleged desecration.

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FULL TEXT

Three people were killed and dozens were wounded in anti- American demonstrations Thursday, the third day of protests that followed reports of interrogators desecrating copies of Islam's holy book at the U.S. detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Thursday's rallies were by far the biggest anti-American protests in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. Officials said two people were killed in the Khogyani district of Nangarhar province when police tried to disperse protesters and keep them from marching to Jalalabad, where four people were killed in similar demonstrations Wednesday.

Another person was killed in the capital of Wardak province, southwest of Kabul, as mobs clashed with police.

In neighboring Lowgar province, rioters ransacked the offices of CARE International, one of the largest aid groups in Afghanistan.

"A couple of our staff members were beat up and some of our computers were broken," said Paul Barker, the CARE director in Afghanistan. "But luckily no one was killed."

CARE evacuated its Lowgar staff to Kabul.

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In Washington, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the reports were being investigated by military authorities, and "if they are proven true, we will take appropriate action."

Rice urged Muslims to resist calls for violence. Her statements came at the start of testimony to U.S. lawmakers.

"We have heard from our Muslim friends around the world about their concerns on this matter. We understand and we share their concerns. Sadly, some people have lost their lives in violent demonstrations," she said.

"I want to speak directly to Muslims in America and throughout the world. Disrespect for the Holy Koran is not now, nor has it ever been, nor will it ever be, tolerated by the United States," she said.

In Kabul, about 300 university students shouted "Death to America!" and burned a U.S. flag.

"We want action taken against those who are trying to demean our great religion," said Abdul Moomen, a student of Islamic law and one of the protest organizers at Kabul University.

Other protesters called on President Hamid Karzai to "stop cooperating with countries that are trying to humiliate Muslims."

Security analysts said the demonstrations were not spontaneous reactions of the public.

"There appears to be a certain degree of planning and coordination in these protests. It could be one group that is setting them all up," said Nick Downie, who heads an independent body that advises aid organizations on security in Afghanistan.

Many here believe Pakistani operatives could be spurring Afghans to organize the protests.

"The majority of Afghans don't have access to international magazines. The information was propagated from the outside," said an Afghan government official who did not want to be identified. "Jalalabad is there on the border of Pakistan. We have reason to believe that the issue was instigated."

Downie said 25 Pakistanis were arrested in Jalalabad on Wednesday. Afghan officials would not comment on that.

Karzai has called the protests "manifestations of democracy," but others say insurgents are testing the country's fledgling military and police forces.

"If widespread violence breaks out all over the country, neither international security forces or national security forces are capable of containing order," Downie said.

More protests are anticipated after Friday afternoon prayers.

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: UP IN ARMS: Upset with reports of Koran desecration, protesters block a road in Lowgar province.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Ahmad Masood Reuters

Credit: Special to The Times

DETAILS

Subject:	Fatalities; Law enforcement; Anti-Americanism; Demonstrations & protests -- Afghanistan; Koran
Location:	United States; US; Afghanistan
Publication title:	Los Angeles Times; Los Angeles, Calif.
Pages:	A.3
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2005
Publication date:	May 13, 2005
Dateline:	KABUL, Afghanistan
Section:	Main News; Part A; Foreign Desk
Publisher:	Los Angeles Times Communications LLC
Place of publication:	Los Angeles, Calif.
Country of publication:	United States, Los Angeles, Calif.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	04583035
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	421984296
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/world-3-die-afghans-anti-u-s-protests/docview/421984296/se-2?accountid=14523
Copyright:	(Copyright (c) 2005 Los Angeles Times)
Last updated:	2017-11-15
Database:	U.S. Major Dailies

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