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Cuba seeks food supplies from U. 1911

UNITED NATIONS (AP) -Cuba's foreign minister said Thursday a U.S. offer of assistance after Hurricane Michelle was Washington's first positive gesture toward the communist island in 40 years, and he hoped it signaled a change in policy.

Felipe Perez Roque told The Associated Press that while Cuba turned down the proffered U.S. aid, it has opened talks with Washington for a one-time cash purchase of food and medicine to replenish stocks depleted by the hurricane.

"The government of the United States offered assistance to us. They offered to send some people from the United States to make an assessment on the damage, and then provide assistance," the foreign minister

"We replied that it was very positive that for the first time ever after 40 years, the United States was going to have a gesture of this nature towards Cuba," Perez Roque said.

Cuba has been under a U.S. embargo for 40 years, though purchases of medical supplies have been allowed since 1992. Exports of food to Cuba were authorized by Congress last year, However, Cuban President Fidel Castro had ruled out food purchases because no American financing was permitted.

But Castro has made an exception because of the devastation of Hurricane Michelle, which destroyed hundreds of thousands of houses and vast tracts of farmland. Perez Roque called it the worst hurricane to hit Cuba in a half century.

Perez Roque said a next positive step from Washington should be "to allow Americans to travel freely to Cuba." U.S. citizens, unless granted waivers, are banned from Cuban travel.

Perez Roque said the fact that the highest levels of the Bush administration must be called on to authorize a special dispensa-

how irrational the blo the United States again is, and how pointless maintain the current restrictions.'

He said he was "n ly optimistic" that ment would be rea allow the shipments and medicine.

Perez Roque said Co cials have presented goods for examination officials. Cuba also ha ed 15 agricultural and ceutical companies in the States, he said.

On Nov. 18

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U.S. sources estin value of the products: at between \$3 million million, but Perez Roo n't confirm the figures.

The foreign ministe ed that if approved, will be shipped on U.S country vessels. The States rejected a Cubanto that the goods be transport

Northern alliance captures som Taliban leaders, others defected

BANGI, Afghanistan (AP) — Northern alliance forces and Pashtun tribesmen encircled two of the Taliban's last remaining strongholds at opposite ends of the country Thursday. The Taliban's supreme leader vowed to fight to the death and to seek the "extinction of America.

Backed by U.S. warplanes, the alliance laid siege to the northern city of Kunduz, where the defenders include an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 foreigners loyal to Osama bin Laden.

In the south, the Taliban clung to tenuous control of its birthplace, Kandahar. Opposition leader Hamid Karzai said his sources told him there was "turmoil" in the city; other sources said local Pashtun tribesmen had surrounded the city.

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said there were spurts of fighting near the city center as the Pashtun fighters advanced. Most of Kandahar province, outside of the city, is in the hands of anti-Taliban rebels, he said.

Gen. Tommy Franks, the U.S. commander of the Afghanistan campaign, said American special forces were operating near Kandahar. Inside the city, Franks said, "we do see signs of some fracturing" within the Taliban ranks. Pashtuns are Afghanistan's the Taliban's harsh five-year regime.

Pakistan strengthened its border defenses closest to Kandahar with tanks and extra troops, worried that unrest — and bin Laden supporters could spill across the frontier.

In other developments:

• Eight international aid workers arrested three months ago for preaching Christianity in Afghanistan were reported in good condition in Pakistan after being helicoptered to safety by U.S. special forces. The women in the group, including two Americans, signaled to their rescuers by burning the body-covering burqas they had been forced to wear.

• U.S. Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge confirmed that documents that would be helpful in making a nuclear device were found in a building in Kabul, described as an al-Qaida safe house. But Ridge said the documents contained information taken off the Internet that could have been widely available to people other than terrorists.

· British troops arrived at the Bagram: north of Kabul, on what the Ministry of said was a mission to prepare the facility for a future humanitarian mission.

 In Washington, the Pentagon said somest Taliban and al-Qaida leaders were illed airstrikes this week, but had no evidence Laden was among them. Defense lenter Donald H. Rumsfeld told a news conferen United States will find bin Laden even if he

• The northern alliance has captured sor ior Taliban military leaders, said a US# speaking on the condition of anonal senior Taliban officers also have with official said. The official declined to with U.S. officials had interviewed the prisons.

President Bush launched airstrikes and Afghanistan on Oct. 7 after the Taliban relia surrender bin Laden, wanted in the Sept." rorist attacks on the World Trade Center to Pentagon.

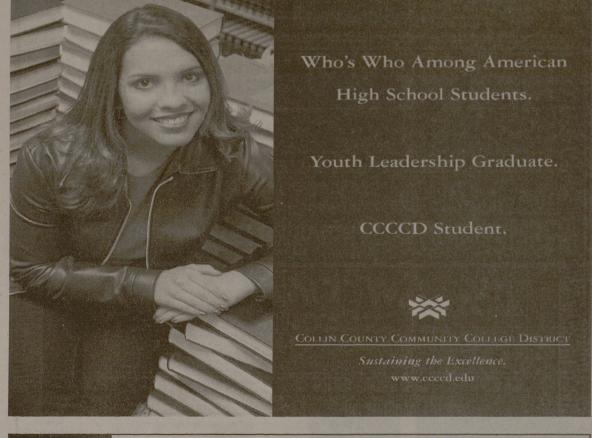
The Taliban supreme leader. Mohammed Omar, sought to portray the Table er strategy aiming to destroy America.

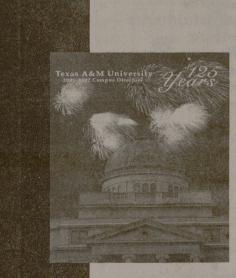
"If God's help is with us, this will will within a short period of time - keep in mile prediction," he said in an interview with the conducted over satellite phone. "The real minutes the extinction of America, and God willing. fall to the ground.

Omar ruled out taking part in a mulici government like the one the United Nation proposed for Afghanistan.

The struggle for a broad-based govern has been going on for the last 20 years, but ing came of it," he said. "We will not at government of wrongdoers. We prefer death to be a part of an evil government.

Kandahar came under heavy bombar Thursday, the Pakistan-based Afghan & Press said. It said eight civilians were kilk 22 injured, a report that could not be independent ly verified.





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