

Afghan candidates hold mass rally as campaign concludes

Security worry haunts people amid Taliban threat

AFP, Kabul

Top candidates in the Afghan presidential race yesterday addressed allies attended by thousands of cheering supporters on the last day of campaigning for key elections overshadowed by Taliban threats.

Afghanistan's 17 million voters go to the polls Thursday to elect a president for the second time in history and 420 councillors in 34 provinces in a massive logistical operation handicapped by rampant insecurity.

President Hamid Karzai, who has ruled since the late 2001 US-led invasion overthrew the Taliban regime, is frontrunner to win but a strong campaign from former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah has raised the

chance of a run-off.

More than 10,000 people poured into a Kabul stadium -- a once notorious Taliban execution ground -- wearing blue baseball hats, waving blue flags, carrying pictures of Abdullah and chanting his name over and over again.

In a vote stunt rare for Afghanistan, a helicopter circled overhead, dropping hundreds of papers marked with Abdullah's photo, election sign and number as marked on the ballot paper to help even the illiterate majority vote.

Afghan police later arrested the pilots of two helicopters and campaign staff for allegedly violating Kabul airspace by dropping the flyers.

"Hey compatriots, wake up, it is time for a big change," said the papers written in the three most common Afghan

languages, Dari, Pashtu and Uzbeki.

"Do you want to vote for the president who releases killers from jail, who releases opium traders from jail?" Abdullah shouted in the microphone, lashing out at Karzai while flanked by a battery of photographers.

Karzai, whose office said one of its final campaign events would unveil four candidates abdicating in his favour, came under fire for alliances with warlords during a first television debate attended by an Afghan head of state.

In a 90-minute head-to-head broadcast Sunday, he was criticised by outspoken anti-corruption campaigners, ex-finance minister Ashraf Ghani, and eccentric but popular Kabul lawmaker Ramazan Bashardost, over the

alleged deals.

The debate put Karzai in the rare position of facing some of his harshest critics and he came under fire for pulling out of an earlier debate in July.

Insecurity has handicapped preparations for Afghanistan's key elections this week, with officials unable to confirm Monday the number of polling stations that will be open.

"Our main concern is security. We are coordinating with Afghan security agencies and doing our best to open as many polling centres as possible," electoral official Zekria Barakzai told reporters, three days before the vote.

"We will know the exact number of centres that will be open on election day, not before that," he added.



Supporters of Afghan presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah arrive at an electoral rally in Kabul yesterday during the last day of campaigning for key elections overshadowed by Taliban threats.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Panicked residents rush their goats to safety after the livestock's rescue by Ahmedabad Fire & Emergency Services officials in the communal riot-affected Shapur Nagarwadi area of Ahmedabad on Sunday. The total number of persons injured in the communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims is yet to be known.

Jaswant describes Jinnah as a 'great Indian'

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Four years ago, senior BJP leader LK Advani had to quit as party chief after his controversial praise of Pakistan founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah during a tour of that country and now another saffron leader and India's former external affairs minister Jaswant Singh described Jinnah as a "great Indian."

Asked during an interview by a TV news channel whether he considered Jinnah as a "great man," Jaswant Singh said "oh yes because he created something out of nothing and single-handedly stood against the might of the Congress party and the British who really didn't like him... Mahatma Gandhi himself called Jinnah a great

Indian. Why don't we recognise that? Why don't we see why he called him that?"

Replying to another question, Singh said he did not subscribe to the view that "demonised" Jinnah. "I admire certain aspects of Jinnah's personality," he added.

He claimed it was not Jinnah but Jawaharlal Nehru's "highly centralised policy" that led to the partition of India.

Singh said India would have remained united had the final decision on the partition been left to Mahatma Gandhi, C Rajagopalachari or Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

He said Pakistan has remained a "conceptual orphan" and the notion of "Muslims being a separate nation does not work."

Suu Kyi 'not opposed' to lifting of sanctions

Says US Senator

AFP, Bangkok

Detained Myanmar pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is "not opposed" to the lifting of some sanctions against the country's military junta, US Senator Jim Webb said yesterday.

The regime allowed the Democrat to meet Suu Kyi on Saturday after she was convicted last week of breaching the terms of her house arrest and ordered to serve a further 18 months in detention.

Nobel peace laureate Suu Kyi has publicly discouraged foreign investment in Myanmar in a bid to pile pres-

sure on the military, but Webb has been a prominent critic of US sanctions.

"With respect to Aung San Suu Kyi, I don't want to take the risk of misrepresenting her views but I would say to you it was my clear impression from her that she is not opposed to lifting some sanctions," Webb said.

"I can say it was my impression from listening to her in the conversation that there were some areas that she would be willing to look at," he told reporters in Bangkok.

Webb is on a two-week tour of Southeast Asia and his visit to Myanmar seemed to be

primarily aimed at securing the release of American John Yettaw, who was sentenced alongside Suu Kyi for an incident in which he swam to her home.

Yettaw was deported from Myanmar on Sunday, after Webb became the first senior US official to meet junta leader Than Shwe, and is currently being treated in a Thai hospital.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party won elections in 1990 but was never allowed to take power and she has been detained by the junta for 14 of the past 20 years.

News Analysis

American's release gives little hope for Suu Kyi

AFP, Bangkok

The release of a US prisoner could herald a softer stance by Myanmar's junta towards Aung San Suu Kyi, but she will almost certainly stay locked up for elections next year, analysts said.

The case of John Yettaw, who was given seven years hard labour for swimming to the democracy icon's house and freed after intervention by a US senator, shows that the hermit regime is making new diplomatic calculations, they said.

But with Yettaw having served his purpose in giving the generals an excuse to extend her house arrest for another 18 months, the move was unlikely to signal any wholesale change in Suu Kyi's conditions, they added.

"Suu Kyi won't be released ahead of 2010 elections, they'll want to get that out of the

way," Ian Holliday, a Myanmar academic at the University of Hong Kong, told AFP.

"Letting Yettaw go without using him as a bargaining tool was a surprise to most people, so that's good, but given the total lack of contact over all these years a lot more bridge building needs to be undertaken," Holliday said.

Democrat Senator Jim Webb's visit came as Washington undertakes a review of its policy on ties with Myanmar, which have been frozen for years amid a tight sanctions regime renewed by President Barack Obama in May.

In an unprecedented step, the senator met reclusive junta leader Than Shwe -- and he succeeded where even UN chief Ban Ki-moon had failed by managing to secure a meeting with Suu Kyi herself.

Webb later said he was "hopeful" the junta would

consider allowing Suu Kyi to participate in elections due in 2010, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently dangled the carrot of business links if the regime frees her.

Webb also hailed its decision to release Yettaw as a step towards thawing ties.

"It's something. They want to engage with the US and they want to reduce international pressure," said Win Min, an academic based in northern Thailand who fled Myanmar during a crackdown on activists in 1988.

Win Min said the junta might decide to revive short-lived talks with Suu Kyi which began after mass demonstrations led by Buddhist monks in 2007 when the ruling generals appointed a minister to liaise with her.

"I think the way it could go is that they talk to her rather than release her, to buy time," he said.

Killing of Sunni militant leader sparks Pak riots

AFP, Multan

The leader of a banned Sunni Islam militant outfit was shot dead in southern Pakistan yesterday, sparking sectarian rioting in Pakistan's biggest city Karachi, police said.

Allama Ali Sher Haideri was killed along with one of his associates in the shooting at Pir Jo Goth village, Khairpur district, in southern Sindh province, senior police official Pir Muhammad Shah told AFP.

He said the attacker was killed after Haideri's guards returned fire, and that several of Haideri's men were wounded in the incident.

Haideri led the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), a Sunni extremist outfit blamed for a string of sectarian attacks across Pakistan against Shias.

Shah said he suspected a personal grudge was the motive for the killing and said the attacker had been identified.

The killing sparked rioting in the volatile southern port city Karachi, the capital of

Sindh province, where angry mobs burnt a bus and a car and fired gunshots into the air, local police official Abdul Karim told AFP.

Shah said that all shops and business also shut their doors in Khairpur district, around 400km north of Karachi.

"We have deployed a maximum police force in the district while paramilitary Rangers are also there to help us," he said.

Life came to standstill as strikes were observed in towns across Sindh province and in parts of neighbouring Punjab province, residents said.

"Police... were deployed in sensitive areas and we are protecting the life and property of the people," said Salman Chaudhry, the police chief in Jhang town, where SSP was formed in the early 1980s.

Shias account for about 20 percent of Pakistan's mostly Sunni Muslim population of 160 million. More than 4,000 people have died in outbreaks of sectarian violence in Pakistan since the late 1980s.

Squalid war camps dent Lanka's image Says opposition

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka risks further damage to its image by failing to improve conditions for tens of thousands of war-displaced people held in squalor, the island's main opposition leader said yesterday.

Opposition leader and former premier Ranil Wickremesinghe warned that the spread of diseases in the camps during the current rains could worsen conditions for nearly 300,000 civilians held in camps.

"Sri Lanka's image will be damaged further if the situation inside camps worsens during heavy rains," Wickremesinghe said. "The government will not be able to re-settle displaced people during monsoon showers."

Sri Lanka is already facing condemnation from international rights organisations and aid agencies for its treatment of the civilians who were displaced during fighting that ended in May.

However, the government has promised to resettle 80 percent of some 300,000 ethnic minority Tamils who were displaced during the final stages of the war in the north by the end of this year.

Heavy showers over the weekend lashed the northern Vavuniya district where most of the displaced people are housed in makeshift camps.

The rains washed away flimsy plastic shelters and wooden floor toilets, while damaged sewer lines flooded some parts of the camps, officials said.

Sri Lanka does not allow the displaced to leave the camps, while access for aid workers is severely restricted. The government says the military is in the process of screening people to weed out former Tamil Tigers fighters.

Vavuniya's top government official, P.S.M. Charles, said flooding has subsided despite moderate rain on Sunday.

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