

Proud, defiant Afghans trickle to polling booths

AFP, Gul Dara Village

"I voted for peace, I voted for change, I voted for the future of my country," said farmer Abu Hadi after casting his vote Thursday in Afghanistan's presidential election.

"I want the war to stop and I want my life to improve," said the 27-year-old as he emerged from a tiny mud-brick mosque in the village of Nesreen, 28 kilometres (17 miles) north of Kabul.

Voting in Nesreen had been peaceful, said Haji Abdul Koudos, an elderly man wearing a tall grey astrakhan hat, as his outstretched arm took in the clutch of children sitting on a nearby wall and the empty fields beyond.

"We've had maybe 500 people here since we opened at 7:00 am (0230 GMT)," said the man, a representative of the Independent Election Commission.

The scene was much the same across the verdant Shomali Plain as Afghans trickled to polling stations to vote for a president for only the second time in Afghanistan's history.

Across the country, too, observers and officials said voting got off to a slow start compared to the long queues that stretched in front of polling booths before voting began in 2004.

Authorities mounted a sweeping security operation that included armed roadblocks and checkpoints amid threats from Taliban militants, but many voters

refused to be deterred.

In Kabul, 27-year-old security guard Ramin strode out of a polling booth and held aloft an ink-stained finger as he proudly proclaimed: "I have voted."

"I'm proud of my finger," he told AFP. "It's the symbol of a great day for Afghanistan."

"I don't care about the Taliban and their threats. Who do they think they are? We have a government, police, army, the infrastructure of a functioning state. The Taliban are all talk."

Ramin was among about 20 people who began queuing outside the Abdul Hadi Dawi secondary school before the polls opened to beat the crowds and the heat.

Afghan women vote for change

AFP, Madrasa

Her eyes barely visible through the tightly woven grill of her blue burqa, Nadeera said her Afghan husband forbids her from showing her face but told her to vote however she wants.

Like all the votes cast by Afghan women in Thursday's presidential and provincial council elections, Nadeera's ballot knows no sex discrimination.

"Today I am voting for change," she said, sitting on a low bench at a primary

school converted into a polling centre near her home village of Madrasa, on the Shomali plain outside Kabul.

"There has been no change in the quality of my life since the fall of the Taliban" in 2001, she said, referring to the lack of economic development.

"My husband was earning 150 afghanis (three dollars) a day as a labourer then and he earns the same now," the 37-year-old told AFP.

Afghans went to the polls Thursday to vote for a president for the second time in

their history, with turnout of women in particular expected to be low due to a protracted Taliban intimidation campaign.

There can be little denying the lot of Afghan women has improved since the end of the horror of the Taliban regime, under which they were not permitted to go to school, work or leave their homes without male relatives.

But there is still a long way to go, said Nazanin Khan Ali, 41, an observer at the Madrasa polling station for the Independent Election Commission (IEC).

Pak-Afghan border sealed for elections

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's border with Afghanistan was closed Thursday and security forces were on alert as Afghans voted in national elections under threat of Taliban attacks, officials and residents said.

An insurgency by the Islamist extremists plagues both Muslim states, with militants slipping over the porous border and also staging attacks on convoys supplying Nato troops as they travel from Pakistan to war-torn Afghanistan.

"The Pak-Afghan border has been completely sealed from Tuesday and will be closed till Friday... security is on high alert on both sides of the border," said Rehman Gul Khattak, assistant administrative chief for Khyber district.

"The containers carrying goods for Nato forces have also been stopped and there are long queues of supply vehicles on the border."

Khattak was referring to the official border posts, but much of the traffic along the 2,500-kilometre (1,500-mile) frontier is through informal crossings or deep in the remote mountains where there is no government presence.

The Khyber official said that Afghans who

had special passes from their embassy allowing them to vote would be able to cross, but added that only about 200 people had passed through the busiest border post at Torkham.

Officials and locals in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, which borders Afghanistan, said the main Chaman border crossing had also been closed.

"We had a meeting with the Afghan authorities a few days ago in which it was decided that the border be closed for the peaceful holding of elections," said Murtaza Beg, spokesman for the Frontier Corps, which guards the border.

"Following the Afghan government's desire we have closed all entry and exit points," he added.

About 1.7 million Afghan refugees remain in Pakistan after fleeing civil war and Taliban rule in their homeland, according to United Nations figures, while hundreds of thousands more are believed to be here illegally.

There are about 860,000 official refugees of voting age living in Pakistan, the UN says. But unlike in Afghanistan's first presidential elections in 2004, no provisions have been made for them to cast absentee ballots.

West struggles to find hope in Afghan polls

AFP, Paris

Faced with mounting casualties and falling public support for the Afghanistan war, Western leaders would like to persuade the world that Thursday's vote will reinvigorate Afghan democracy.

They would like the winner, whether incumbent Hamid Karzai or one of his challengers to enjoy the political legitimacy that could help build the kind of settlement that brings peace to the country, analysts said.

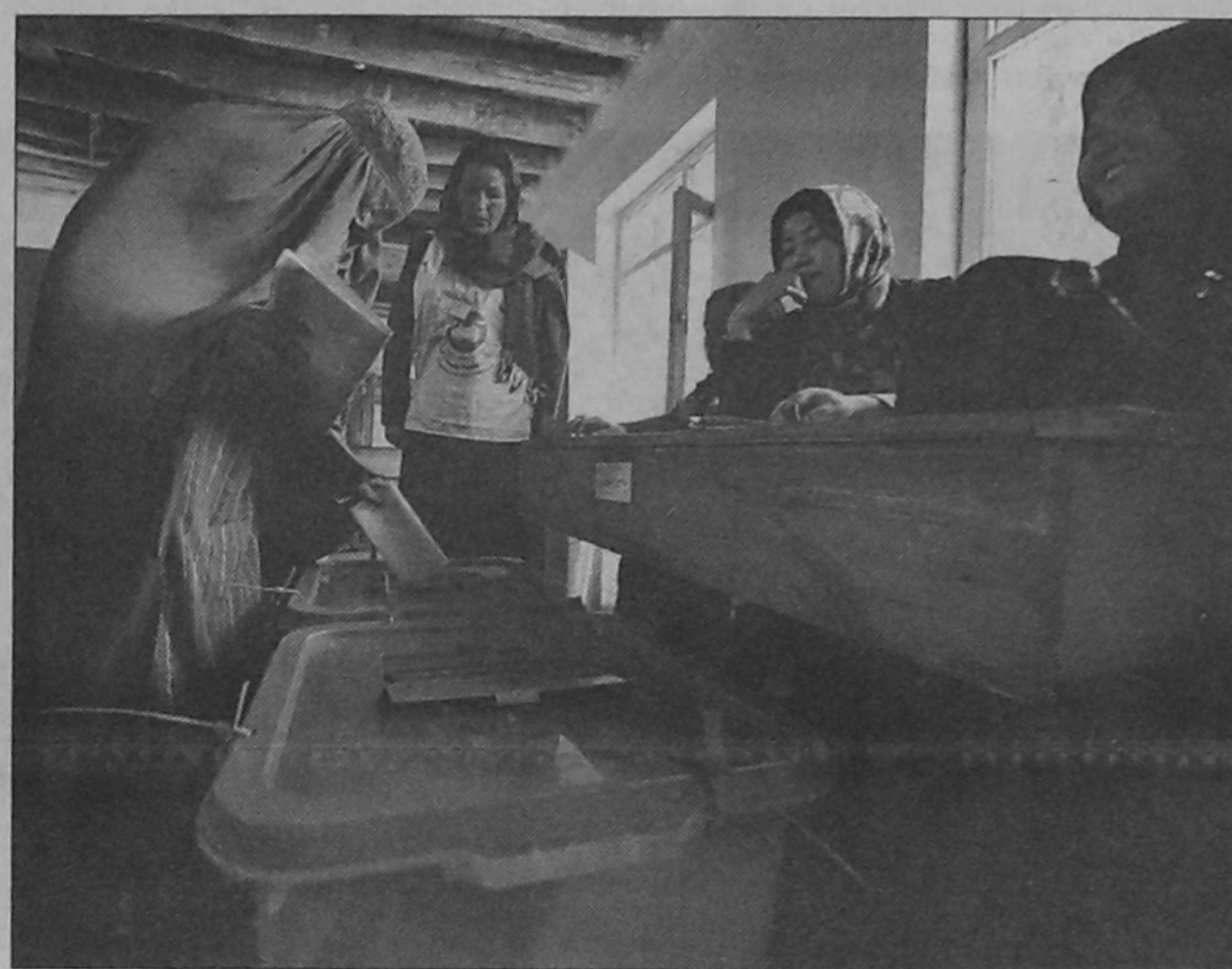
But even if the election proves to be just another violent episode in Afghanistan's history, they have emphasized the fact that Afghans voting at all shows that the Western mission has not been in vain.

"Holding the election is a very important part of Afghanistan emerging as a nation state which can organise its own affairs," Australia's Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said as polls opened, reflecting the Western line.

"There's been no united insurgent campaign against the elections," noted Bernd Muetzelburg, Germany's special envoy for the conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan, welcoming local ceasefires in certain districts.

"These elections are another step towards creating a stable and secure Afghanistan," said a British Foreign Office spokesman. "They are the first Afghan-led election in decades."

"Afghan interest is high, and the campaign is vigorous and competitive. It's clear that the vast majority of Afghans want to own their country's future, and shape it by ballots, not bullets."



A burqa-clad Afghan woman casts her vote at a polling station in Kabul yesterday. Afghans voted to elect a president for just the second time in their war-torn history amid massive security clampdown.



Indian villagers gather to watch a washed away section of a railway bridge on the Balason River in Matigara village on the outskirts of Siliguri yesterday. Continuous rainfall in the last 24 hours has caused a flood-like situation and several landslides in the nearby hills of Siliguri and adjoining areas of North Bengal.

Pak Taliban chief's deputy takes over group

AP, Peshawar

The deputy head of the Pakistani Taliban announced that he is temporarily assuming leadership of the militant group because its chief is ill, although Washington and Islamabad have said he almost certainly was killed by a recent missile strike.

The announcement Wednesday by Maulvi Faqir Mohammad was another sign that Taliban commanders are jockeying for power after the reported death of Baitullah Mehsud in an Aug. 5 CIA missile strike in northwestern Pakistan's tribal belt. A captured Taliban spokesman reportedly acknowledged to authorities that Mehsud was dead, but other commanders have insisted he is alive.

Mohammad also claimed Mehsud was alive, but said he was too ill to lead Pakistan's Taliban. "I was the deputy leader of

the Tehrik-e-Taliban and now since Baitullah Mehsud is unable to perform as head of the organisation due to health reasons and unable to come on the foreground, I am announcing I am assuming the role of acting chief," Mohammad told The Associated Press by telephone from an undisclosed location.

He stressed his appointment was only temporary, and said the final decision on who would replace Mehsud would rest with a 42-member Taliban council, known as a Shura.

"Now, when the entire world has its eye on us, our Shura will decide our future leader in consultation with all," Mohammad told the AP.

Two of the top contenders are considered to be leading commanders Hakimullah Mehsud and Waliur Rehman, and Mohammad described them as "both capable and energetic leaders."

Gilani rules out Musharraf's high treason trial

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has virtually ruled out the trial of former President General Pervez Musharraf for high treason, saying such step could trigger political imbalance in the country.

Responding to opposition leader Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan's demand in the National Assembly, Gilani questioned the 'feasibility' of a Musharraf trial.

"We should do what is doable," Gilani said in what was an apparent turnaround from his earlier statement where he said the former Army chief would be tried for violating the Constitution if Parliament unanimously passes a resolution for it.

"We should not take any action that can't be reversed. Our (PPP) chairman has already said that democracy is the best revenge. And we have taken our revenge through democracy. We have come to parliament. Now we should try to strengthen democracy. We should not play to galleries," Gilani said.

Earlier, Khan told the National Assembly that a draft of resolution regarding Musharraf's trial has already been prepared and he would move it in

the house if the Prime Minister agreed to charge Musharraf under Article 6 of the Constitution.

Khan had raised the issue in the house earlier this month, but it subsequently died down following former Prime Minister and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) chief Nawaz Sharif's statement that a parliamentary resolution was not needed and that government should invoke Article 6 on its own after the Supreme Court declared the November 3 emergency and other related decrees as 'unconstitutional' and 'extra-judicial'.

During Khan's speech, PML-N members chanted slogans in protest against MQM's protest shouts against his criticism of the Karachi-based party's association first with Pakistan's third military dictator late General Zia-ul-Haq and then with General Musharraf, the Dawn reports.

"Whoever is friend of Musharraf is traitor," PML-N leaders shouted.

MQM deputy parliamentary leader Haider Abbas Rizvi criticised both the PPP and the PML-N, saying his party has been used by both whenever they needed its support, and was ignored afterwards and even subjected to military operations.

Lockerbie bomber freed to die in Libya

AFP, Edinburgh

The Libyan jailed for the 1988 Lockerbie bombing was granted release on compassionate grounds in Scotland yesterday, despite fierce US opposition to freeing him.

In a move likely to be hailed by Libya as a new sign of its return to global respectability, Abdelbaset Ali Mohmet al-Megrahi -- who has terminal prostate cancer -- was given his freedom by Scottish Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill.

MacAskill said Megrahi, who medics say has less than three months to live, could return to Libya to die because Scottish law required that "justice be served but mercy be shown."

The 57-year-old "now faces justice from a higher power... he is going to die," MacAskill added.

In Tripoli, an official in the Libyan prime minister's office said: "He is free and will arrive in Libya in the next few hours." Earlier officials at a military airport near Tripoli said preparations were under way for his return.

Megrahi is the only person convicted of blowing up Pan Am flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie, killing 270 people, in Britain's worst ever terror attack. He has served just eight years of a minimum 27-year sentence.

MacAskill has been considering three options in Megrahi's case: transferring him to a Libyan jail, freeing him on compassionate grounds or keeping him in Greenock prison, near Glasgow in western Scotland.

In the run-up to the decision, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has led strong US opposition to Megrahi's release.

Pakistan feels heat from nuclear powers over talks block

AFP, Geneva

Pakistan came under severe pressure from the major nuclear powers on Thursday to end its defiance of 64 other countries in blocking international disarmament talks.

Despite warnings that the blockade could discredit the world's principal disarmament forum, Pakistan's ambassador Zahir Akram held firm against an unusual joint offensive by Britain, China, Russia and the United States.

Citing unspecified national security concerns, Pakistan has been alone in stalling since the 65 states took a landmark decision in May to break more than a decade of deadlock in the Conference on Disarmament (CD) by agreeing on a work plan for 2009.

'CIA hired Blackwater to kill Qaeda leaders'

AFP, Washington

The CIA hired the security firm Blackwater in 2004 as part of its secret programme to find and kill al-Qaeda leaders, US media said yesterday, citing current and former intelligence officials.

The programme, on which the Central Intelligence Agency spent several million dollars, was cut before launching any missions and the hiring of an outside company was a major reason that CIA director Leon Panetta moved to cancel it, the New York Times said.

Shortly after learning about the effort in June, Panetta pulled the plug and briefed lawmakers on details of the programme, of which they had not been informed since 2001.

Citing government officials, the Times said the CIA had separate agreements with top Blackwater executives for the outsourcing, as opposed to a formal contract with the whole firm.

The State Department cut ties with Blackwater following ongoing allegations of abuse in Iraq. The North Carolina-based company renamed itself Xe after the Iraq government banned it in January over the killings in Baghdad's Nisur Square on September 16, 2007.

It had been given "operational responsibility" for the targeting programme, according to the Washington Post, which noted the covert effort was cancelled before any missions were conducted.



Chairperson of India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi (L) and her daughter Priyanka Gandhi (R) arrive to meet handicapped people and distribute scooters among them in New Delhi yesterday. The programme was held in memory of former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi on his 65th birth anniversary.