



Afghan election workers count votes at their computer terminals at the Independent Election Commission (IEC) headquarters in Kabul yesterday. Afghanistan's contested presidential election has the potential to lay the foundations for a political system in which opposing factions draw broad support and power changes hands at the ballot box.

PHOTO: AFP

## Afghan polls lay hope for power of ballot box

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's contested presidential election has the potential to lay the foundations for a political system in which opposing factions draw broad support and power changes hands at the ballot box.

With the result still too close to call, leading candidates, the Afghan government and the international community appear to be preparing for the possibility of a second round run-off.

The main contenders for the top job -- President Hamid Karzai and former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah -- claimed they were ahead based on numbers their campaign offices were gathering.

But the official result is not expected before September 3, according to the Independent Electoral Commission, and both men have been asked by Afghanistan's foreign partners to refrain from public statements on the outcome.

"It is just too close to call," said one international consultant.

Afghans voted in presidential and provincial council elections on Thursday in a poll, which international observers

said was marred by violence and allegations of fraud, but was in the main acceptable.

The election was only the second for president in the country's history and the first Afghans have organised for themselves, the culmination of weeks of energetic campaigning.

Foreign allies see it as a vital milestone in Afghanistan's development under the guidance of the US and the international community, which together bankrolled the vote and have more than 100,000 troops in the country.

The shadow of Taliban violence was blamed for quashing participation in southern regions where the insurgents are strong, which is likely to see turnout unevenly distributed between the south and the relatively stable north.

"Violence and intimidation disenfranchised voters in a significant portion of the country," US-based election monitor Democracy International said.

"In more secure areas, however, Afghans generally were able to cast votes freely," it said.

Preliminary indications from unofficial sources are that Karzai and Abdullah

have been able to mobilise voters outside their traditional strongholds -- Karzai in the south, Abdullah in the north -- and are running neck-and-neck.

"We have an election that may not result in 50 percent of the vote going to either of them," analyst and author Waheed Mujda told Afghan television, referring to the minimum requirement of 50 percent plus one vote to win.

Abdullah has given a filip to the process -- for weeks seen as a foregone conclusion for Karzai -- and raised the prospect that a credible opposition could emerge and power be swapped according to the will of the electorate.

Abdullah has a long history in the public eye, having gained a profile as a spokesman and aide for famous anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, assassinated in 2001, before becoming foreign minister under Karzai.

"He has said he sees this (election) being a stepping stone to next year's parliamentary election and a move towards the emergence of political parties and I think he still has that ambition," said a Western official.

## Widespread rigging in favour of Karzai, alleges Abdullah

AFP, Kabul

Leading Afghan presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah on Sunday claimed there was widespread rigging in last week's election in favour of the incumbent, President Hamid Karzai.

"There are widespread irregularities, fraud and efforts for rigging," Abdullah, Karzai's closest challenger, told reporters.

In some cases, he said his team was receiving "constant reports" that turnout at Thursday's election was shown in some areas to be four times higher than it really was, with all the votes for Karzai.

The former foreign minister said the charges were from areas where turnout was agreed to have been low or non-existent.

One claim was that the home of a senior police official in the southern province of Kandahar, where the Taliban are strong, was used as a polling station.

Abdullah said his team was still investigating the allegations. "We don't have the com-

plete picture yet," he said.

"Since this is a sign of widespread rigging, I thought the people of Afghanistan deserve to know what is going on and the international community deserves to know about our concerns."

He said the allegations had been directed to the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) for investigation.

"Hopefully we will be able to prevent widespread rigging through legal means," Abdullah said.

"We are in the early stages of the final outcome, the final result will be three weeks from now."

"In between, we have time to deal with it and that is a crucial time -- as far as Afghanistan and as far as the future of democracy is concerned."

The ECC announced earlier that it had received around 225 allegations of irregularities, some of which could affect the results.

Abdullah's office had already announced it lodged 40 complaints, mostly alleging local officials ordered people to vote for Karzai.

## Yemeni troops kill 100 Shia rebels in fighting

AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni troops have killed more than 100 Shia rebels, including two of their commanders, in an operation to recapture a small town in the northern mountains, the government said yesterday.

"The bodies of more than 100 rebels have been recovered from the roadside outside the town of Hafu Sufyan," a government statement said.

"It seems that the bodies were those of rebels who were trying to flee the town during a mopping-up operation over the past two days," the statement said, adding that two of the dead were identified as commanders Mohsen Saleh Hadi Gaud and Salah Jorman.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh pledged on Wednesday to crush the Shia rebellion in the north as the army pressed on with an offensive launched two weeks ago.

The campaign, dubbed Operation Scorched Earth, aims to end once and for all a rebellion by Zaidi Shia rebels, also known as Huthis, in the rugged mountainous region.

Fighting began in Saada province on the border with Saudi Arabia and has since spread to Amran province to the south where Hafu Sufyan is located.

An offshoot of Shia Islam, the Zaidis are a minority in mainly Sunni Yemen but form the majority community in the north. Saleh is himself a Zaidi.



A Pakistani investigator collects evidences on the site of bomb blast at the northwestern city of Peshawar on Saturday. A remote-controlled bomb exploded in a car killing a militant spokesman and his driver in Peshawar.

PHOTO: AFP

## Monsoon misery for Lanka war refugees

AFP, Colombo

Tamil civilians who lived through the vicious final battle of Sri Lanka's separatist war are now locked in another struggle for survival with heavy rains bringing misery to the camps they call home.

Nearly 300,000 people displaced by the fighting between government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels are held in what the government calls "welfare villages" which are off-limits to independent media.

"This is inhuman. This is a living hell," pro-government Tamil politician Dharmalingam Sithadthan said of the camps where recent pre-monsoon rains overwhelmed sewer systems and flooded tents.

"The rains earlier this month were freak showers," said Sithadthan. The heavy monsoon rains "will start in October and the conditions will only get worse. The government must give people the choice to leave the camps."

The United States, which led international criticism over civilian casualties in the final phase of Colombo's offensive against the Tamil Tigers, has also been vocal in its concerns over the plight of the displaced survivors.

The United Nations said more than 7,000 civilians may have perished in the five months before the war ended in May.

"Involuntary confinement is especially a source of concern given the recent rains and given the coming of the monsoon season," said Eric Schwartz, the US assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration.

"It makes it all the more important that release from confinement be an issue that friends of Sri Lanka continue to raise," he said in Washington on Wednesday.

Rains last week destroyed nearly 2,000 makeshift shelters at the Manik Farm resettlement complex in northern Sri Lanka.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said there was a danger of disease spreading in the camps with the onset of the monsoon and asked Colombo to end what the group insists is the illegal detention of civilians.

A 30-year-old woman interviewed by the rights watchdog described the impact of the rains on the shelter she shared with her infant son and other refugees.

"Within seconds, the water was pouring into our tents. ... After a couple of minutes, everything was flooded. We lost all of our things. It was terrible. We were already frightened and this made it worse," she said.



Indian school students wave to greet a Metro coach during its inaugural run in Kolkata on Saturday. A 5.8-kilometre metro rail stretch from Tollygunge to Garia Bazar, which is an overhead extension of a 25-year old 16.5 km stretched underground Kolkata Metro railway network, was inaugurated by Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee.

PHOTO: AFP

### News in Brief

#### 2 Pak intelligence officers shot dead

PTI, Islamabad

Unidentified gunmen shot dead two intelligence officers in the northwestern Pakistani city of Nowshera, police said today. The armed men fired indiscriminately at Military Intelligence officer Aftab Alam and Naik Ameer Hamza in front of their homes in a military residential colony in Nowshera cantonment, they said.

Both personnel died instantly. Despite strict security arrangements within the military colony, the gunmen escaped from the spot in a car. No group claimed responsibility for the attack.

#### Four killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops killed four Muslim rebels in Kashmir in a violent start to the holy fasting month of Ramadan, officials said yesterday.

Two militants were shot dead at dawn in northern Kupwara district after they infiltrated into Indian Kashmir from the Pakistani zone of the divided state, an Indian army spokesman said. Two others were killed overnight in the same district during a fierce gun battle.

#### Great train robber Biggs says sorry

AFP, Berlin

Ronnie Biggs, notorious for his role in the Britain's 1963 Great Train Robbery, said sorry in a German newspaper interview on Sunday -- but only to his family for the hurt he has caused them.

In what Bild am Sonntag billed as his first interview since being released on compassionate grounds in early August due to serious illness, Biggs said his wish was to live as long as possible. Asked if there was anyone he wished to say sorry to after his life of crime, Biggs replied: "To my family. For all the aggravation I have caused them."

## Lanka to train Pak army, offers same to India

PTI, London

After its success in defeating the Tamil Tigers, the Sri Lankan army has agreed to train Pakistani military in tackling insurgency and offered the same to India.

The Sri Lankan army's new commander, Lt Gen Jagath Jayasuriya told the BBC that Pakistan had already asked if it could send its military cadets to train in counter-insurgency operations.

"We'll give a favourable response," Lt Gen Jagath Jayasuriya said of the request.

He said "Sri Lanka has offered similar training, through diplomatic channels, to other countries including India, the United States, Bangladesh and the Philippines."

The Sri Lankan military envisaged specialist courses lasting up to six weeks, directed towards small groups from interested armies, he added. Lt Gen Jayasuriya said there was external interest in how the military had

defeated the rebel group in practical terms. The army now wished to construct a written military doctrine in English.

Dismissing reports that the Pakistanis might receive military training in newly recaptured parts of northern Sri Lanka, he said it would be more likely in the south-east.

Lt Gen Jayasuriya also said that new permanent military bases would be set up in those northern areas including the rebels' former headquarters, Kilinochchi.

Sri Lanka and Pakistan have long enjoyed warm relations.

In Late May, Pakistan - like India, China and Russia - helped Colombo defeat a motion at the UN which would have criticised both the government and the rebels for allegedly violating humanitarian law during the war.

The BBC report said India might be uncomfortable at this news of the Pakistanis' interest in being trained.

## India offers 'full support' to Nepal's peace process

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

India Saturday offered its 'full support' to the peace process in Nepal, with both countries also saying they would hold discussions on reworking their Treaty of Peace and Friendship that was signed nearly six decades ago.

"The Prime Minister of India expressed full support for the ongoing peace process and efforts to bring about economic transformation in Nepal," said a joint statement issued on the conclusion of Nepalese Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal's five-day visit to India.

The joint statement also noted that the

Nepalese prime minister had asserted that his government's main priorities were the 'positive and meaningful' conclusion of the peace process, completing the new constitution and economic development.

The joint statement said that both prime ministers had directed their foreign secretaries to hold discussions on revising the Treaty of Peace and Friendship.

On his first foreign visit after assuming office three months ago, Nepal arrived in India Aug 18 and during his stay, held discussions with his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh and other leaders.

## Do Asia-Pacific quakes herald a disaster?

AFP, Jakarta

Powerful earthquakes that have jolted Asia recently do not presage a disaster, although it is only a matter of time before the next catastrophe befalls the quake-prone region, seismologists say.

From India to Japan, Indonesia and as far south as New Zealand, the region has been rattled by what appear to be a connected spate of strong quakes in the past few weeks.

Luckily they have caused little damage and few casualties, but for people living in countries straddling the so-called "Pacific Ring of Fire" of major fault-lines, each new tremor raises the question: when will the "big one" hit?

The bottom line is that earthquakes are impossible to predict and, while catastrophic quakes are inevitable, no one can say when they will strike.

Japan in particular has been bracing itself for an expected magnitude-eight quake believed most likely to strike in the Tokai region near Tokyo. People even have a name for the anticipated disaster: the Tokai

Quake.

"Series of earthquakes can often be monitored, but last week's earthquake does not appear to be a sign pointing to the 'big one'," Tokyo University honorary professor of seismology Ryohei Morimoto told AFP, referring to a 6.6-magnitude quake that struck Japan on August 17.

Around 20 percent of the world's most powerful earthquakes strike Japan. The megacity of Tokyo in particular sits on the intersection of three continental plates -- the Eurasian, Pacific and Philippine Sea plates.

The last time a "big one" struck Tokyo was in 1923, when the Great Kanto Earthquake claimed more than 140,000 lives, many of them in fires. Previously, in 1855, the Ansei Edo quake also devastated the city.

Experts say quakes in particular areas may be related, but they see no link between quakes on different boundaries of tectonic plates, such as the huge 7.5-magnitude tremor that shook the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean and the 6.4-magnitude quake that hit Japan almost simultaneously on August 11.

## China drought leaves 5 million short of water

AP, Beijing

A drought in China's north has left nearly 5 million people short of drinking water and damaged crops, while dry weather in the south could cause more shortages, a state news agency reported Sunday.

The drought has caused water shortages for 4.6 million people and 4.1 million head of livestock, the Xinhua News Agency said, citing an announcement by the national anti-drought administration.

Affected areas stretch from Jilin province in the northeast to the grasslands of Inner Mongolia in the north and the drought is spreading, Xinhua said, citing an administration official, Zhang Xu.

Crops on some 22 million acres (8.7 million hectares) of farmland have been damaged, the report said.



Pakistani women gather to buy bags of wheat flour on lower rates at the Ramadan Bazaar in Lahore yesterday on the first day of the holy month of Ramadan.

PHOTO: AFP