



A Pakistani paramilitary soldier stands beside burning Nato oil supply tankers on the outskirts of Quetta on Tuesday. Gunmen in southwest Pakistan set ablaze eight trucks carrying fuel supplies for Nato forces fighting Taliban insurgents in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Nato defends 'progress' as Afghan criticism mounts

AFP, Brussels

Nato Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen came to the defence Wednesday of efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan amid mounting criticism of military operations and fraud-tainted elections.

In remarks released by his office, Rasmussen insisted that the fundamentalist Taliban militia could never take power again, and that last month's polls, while flawed, were still a step forward for the country.

"I am concerned that the public discourse on the effort in Afghanistan has started to go in the wrong direction," said Rasmussen, who was due later Wednesday to take part in a Nato ceremony in the United States.

While acknowledged the criticism, he underlined: "We may not be making progress fast enough, but we are making progress."

"The Taliban has no chance of taking power again, nor do terrorists have any safe haven in Afghanistan from which to threaten the world. Afghans are slowly but steadily leading better, freer lives."

"And while the elections have clearly not been close to perfect, in the context, they were still a step forward," he said.

Earlier Wednesday, leading challengers for the Afghan presidency claimed massive fraud had compromised the August 20 polls, raising questions about the legitimacy of Hamid Karzai's expected

second term in office.

The president passed the key threshold of an outright majority based on results from more than 90 percent of polling stations, which put the war-torn and corrupt country on track for five more years of Karzai rule.

Western allies, who have sent more than 100,000 soldiers to fight the Taliban-led insurgency and support the government, have condemned the fraud during Afghanistan's second presidential election.

Those foreign governments are facing increasingly hostile public opposition to the war effort, particularly due to record international fatalities as their troops stepped up combat in July.

The North said Monday that it "urgently" ordered the discharge because the reservoir's water level was too high.

Drought-hit Indian farmers sell wives to pay debts

AFP, Lucknow

Drought-hit farmers in northern India are resorting to selling their wives to repay debts to local loan sharks, activists say, as one of the weakest monsoons in years takes its toll.

Poverty, poor administration and a lack of education means farmers in the rugged Bundelkhand region are taking extreme steps to pull through a poor rainy season, they say.

"This has been happening for quite some time now, but people were hesitant to come out with all this," said Manoj Kumar, a social activist working with farmers in the area.

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Western allies, who have sent more than 100,000 foreign soldiers to fight a Taliban insurgency and support the government, have been withering in their condemnation of fraud during the country's only second presidential election.

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no exit in sight.

Karzai's main rival, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah -- trailing the president in the vote count released so far -- said the election commission should suspend the release of results as the figures include fraudulent votes.

"It's illegal what they have been doing and on top of this I think these announcements include hundreds of thousands of fraudulent votes," he told AFP of a timetable clearly laid out before the

election.

For the first time, the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) said Tuesday it had found "clear and convincing evidence of fraud".

"I think in two phases you'll see that hundreds or thousands of votes will be discounted or taken out. That's quite likely and that will affect the outcome of the election," Abdullah hit out Tuesday.

"I think the damage will be unfortunately a lasting one."

Massive vote fraud will hurt Afghanistan

Says Abdullah

AFP, Kabul

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