

AFGHAN ELECTION

Taliban vow to disrupt polls

AFP, Kabul

Taliban insurgents appear to be making good on threats to kill candidates in Afghanistan's parliamentary elections...

In recent weeks, three candidates and at least seven campaign workers have been killed, and many others kidnapped and injured...

More than 2,500 candidates will contest 249 seats in the lower house of the Afghan parliament...

The attacks are part of the Taliban's plan to disrupt the poll, said a spokesman for the group...

"We urge people not to participate in the election. Everything and everyone affiliated with the election is our target..."

The United States and Nato have almost 150,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, fighting

an insurgency that has become increasingly virulent since the Taliban's 1996-2001 regime was toppled in a US-led invasion.

Taliban leaders at the grassroots have taken the directive to heart, with one commander in northern Balkh province evoking Mullah Omar...

"Such elections don't have any legitimacy for us, since our leader Mullah Omar has already called for a boycott..."

As the vote nears, and the pace and ferocity of the attacks intensifies, election officials have conceded that security in some areas is so poor they will not be able to get out the vote.

The Independent Election Commission (IEC), which oversees the poll, has said that about four percent of the polling centres, mainly in the south and east where the war is fiercest, will not open because security cannot be guaranteed.

Candidates and their supporters have been bombed, kidnapped, shot and, in one case in troubled Ghazni province south of Kabul, beheaded.

In the latest incident, 28 IEC employees were reportedly kidnapped on Thursday in northern Baghlan province, and released after the intervention of tribal elders.

Nepal's parliament again fails to elect new PM

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's parliament failed for the sixth time to elect a prime minister yesterday, as the house speaker warned of a "serious crisis" if a new government is not in place soon.

The country has been without a government since June 30, when former prime minister Madhav Kumar Nepal stood down under pressure from the opposition Maoist party...

Since then, political leaders have been unable to agree on the shape of the new administration and five earlier votes to try to select a new prime minister have failed.

The Maoists, who fought a decade-long civil war against the state before transforming themselves into a political party ahead of 2008 elections, hold the largest number of seats in parliament, but not enough to govern alone.

Party leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known as Prachanda, is standing against Ram Chandra Poudel, chairman of the second-largest party in parliament, the centrist Nepali Congress.

But neither candidate has been able to secure the backing of the rival parties they need to form a new coalition government.

The Maoists are in talks with a grouping of four small parties that collectively hold 82 of the 601 seats in parliament, but no deal has yet been done.

Dahal secured 240 votes to Poudel's 122 in

Sunday's poll, in which the third-largest party, the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (UML), remained neutral.

It has called on both candidates to withdraw from the race and for the parties to open negotiations on forming a power-sharing government.

In the meantime, the country is being ruled by a caretaker government with limited powers, a situation that has delayed much-needed public spending in one of the world's poorest countries.

Before the vote, the speaker of the house Subas Nembang said people were growing increasingly frustrated by the stalemate and warned of a "serious crisis" if it persisted.

"The impasse has raised questions about the democratic system," he told AFP.

"The country has been ruled by a caretaker government for two months, resulting in a delay to the annual budget, and it is heading towards a serious crisis."

Nepal's parliament, or Constituent Assembly, was elected in May 2008 with a two-year mandate to complete the country's post-war peace process and draft a new national constitution.

But it has failed to complete either task, hampered by disagreements between the Maoists and their rivals.

Lawmakers voted on May 31 to extend its term to give them time to complete the constitution and the peace process but little progress has been made since then.



PHOTO: AFP Nepal's caretaker PM Madhav Kumar Nepal (R) and Unified Communist Party of Nepal's (Maoist) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda (L), talk while they leave parliament after failing for the sixth time to elect a prime minister yesterday. The house speaker warned of a "serious crisis" if a new government is not in place soon.

Floods give renewed clout to Pakistan Army

NEWS ANALYSIS

REUTERS, Multan

The message in black Urdu lettering on a white sack of supplies for flood relief says it all: "In tough times, the Pakistan Army is with you."

The powerful military has taken the lead in providing relief - dwarfing the civilian government - and in doing so has greatly enhanced its prestige and influence.

And while nobody expects it to take over, the renewed clout of the army is perhaps the biggest political change brought by the floods, one likely to define its relationship with, and leverage over, the civilian government for years to come.

The army, which became deeply unpopular in the final years of former president Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in a coup in 1999 and stepped down in 2008, had already clawed back considerable influence over foreign and security policy.

But in the flood relief it has become very visible as the only national institution with the manpower, the organizational skills and the equipment -- including

helicopters and boats -- to help some 20 million affected by the floods.

At a boys' college turned warehouse in Multan, soldiers work around the clock to assemble packages of emergency relief. The commander in charge of the area has been on the go since the floods hit a month before, says Major Farooq Feroze, the officer in charge of public relations in Multan.

"He is supervising each and every movement," he says. "He keeps us all alert. He himself is sleepless."

That is in stark contrast to the sluggish response of the civilian government, and the departure of President Asif Ali Zardari on a visit to France and Britain when the floods began.

Technically, the army is working on the orders of the government, and at the operational level, civilian and military authorities are working together closely.

According to defense analyst Siddiqi, the army was deliberately stressing the inefficiencies of the government to keep it, and Zardari, on the back foot. "It is not because they want to get rid of him, they want to send a message," she said. "It's more of a warning shot right now."

The next election is not due until 2013 and the main opposition leader, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, has shown no inclination to try to take power. He also has reasons to be wary of the military -- he was ousted in the 1999 coup.

In the absence of a coup, therefore, the only way to weaken him would be if the PPP itself were either split or sidelined through a rebellion by political allies and opponents, or possibly even through a vote of no confidence in the government.

In a country rife with rumour and conspiracy theories, it is impossible to predict exactly how the politics will play out.

What is clear, however, is that the popular refrain in the last years of Musharraf's rule -- that "the worst democracy is better than the best dictatorship" -- has lost its sheen.

And the army, which has ruled Pakistan on-and-off since independence in 1947, has been able to present itself again as the saviour of the country. Or as a banner says on one of the colourfully painted trucks packed with relief supplies: "The Pakistan Army and the people are together."

India test-fires Brahmos cruise missile

REUTERS, Bhubaneswar

India yesterday test-fired an advanced version of a supersonic cruise missile, officials said, as part of the country's drive to boost its defence system.

The Brahmos, which can travel at up to 2.8 times the speed of sound and has a range of 290 km (180 miles), was tested at a test range in the eastern state of Orissa.

The Brahmos, named after India's Brahmaputra river and Russia's Moscow river, was developed by a joint venture between India's Defense Research and Development Organisation and Russia's NPO Mashinostroyen.

India mulls legalising gambling amid cricket scandal

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government is looking at proposals to legalise the country's multi-million-dollar underground gambling market to tackle corruption in cricket, according to a newspaper report yesterday.

India is regarded as the hotbed of global betting syndicates, with gamblers and bookmakers involved in a massive network of illegal "spot-fixing" -- when stakes are pitched on individual balls or on short passages of play.

"The aim is to ascertain whether legalized betting can exist in India without the stigma attached to it now. So, we are looking at the pros and cons with great care," an unnamed sport ministry official told the Times of India.

The shady world of Indian bookmakers came to light in a match-fixing scandal in 2000 that led to life bans for Test captains Hansie Cronje (South Africa), Mohammad Azharuddin (India) and Salim Malik (Pakistan).

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Indian Youth Congress activists wearing masks of party general secretary Rahul Gandhi, wave party flags during a rally in Kolkata yesterday. Rahul will address a rally for party workers in the eastern Indian city today.

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Floodwaters sweep towards another Pakistani town

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani authorities were trying to protect another town from floodwaters in southern Sindh province, as the nation continues to grapple with its worst natural disaster in living memory.

A month after monsoons caused devastating floods throughout the country, submerging an area the size of England, eight million people remain dependent on handouts for their survival, which many say are too slow coming.

Surging floodwaters continue to threaten towns in southern Sindh, where 19 of its 23 districts have been deluged and more than one million people displaced.

"We are trying our best to protect Johi town, threatened by ravaging floodwaters," district administration chief Iqbal Memon told AFP.

The town, which is 315 kilometres (195 miles) north of Karachi has a population of 60,000 and officials fear that floodwaters will breach embankments surrounding the town unless they are quickly strengthened.

"The floodwaters are fast heading towards Johi town after inundating most parts of Khairpur Nathan Shah town and Mehr town and several surrounding villages in Dadu district," he said. "We are right now employing all available means to strengthen the protective embankments around Johi but the threat still remains," he said, adding that 70 percent population of the town has already migrated to safer areas.

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