

Intimidation and washable ink mar Afghan vote

AFP, Kabul

Complaints of intimidation and wide-ranging irregularities including problems with indelible ink dogged Afghanistan's parliamentary elections yesterday, officials and witnesses said.

Election observers said they had reported more than 200 serious acts of intimidation, while voters were easily able to wash supposedly indelible ink off their fingers in 2,950 polling centres -- nearly half of those nationwide.

"Intimidation was carried out by insurgents, power-brokers and candidates at the outset of voting," the Free and Fair Election Foundation for Afghanistan (FEFA) said.

"Ink quality was a widespread problem," it said in a statement.

The group said FEFA observers reported 224 serious incidents of intimidation during the first four hours of election day.

UN and US officials have said fraud and security are the major concerns in the election, the second parliamentary vote since the US-led invasion that ousted the hardline Taliban regime in 2001.

FEFA said there were more than 600 instances of candidates continuing their campaigns beyond the official close at midnight Wednesday, more than a fifth of polling centres opened late and there were too few female election officials.



An Afghan woman registers before casting vote at a polling station in Kabul yesterday. Afghanistan was voting for a new parliament September 18 against a backdrop of rebel attacks and a full security alert following Taliban threats to derail the high-stakes election.

Election violence down on last year's: Nato

AFP, Kabul

Nato's mission in Afghanistan recorded far fewer violent incidents aimed at disrupting yesterday's parliamentary election than during the presidential poll last year, a spokesman said.

Nato's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had recorded 303 separate incidents by the time voting closed at 4:00pm (1130 GMT), a spokesman told AFP.

This compared with 479 incidents on August 20 last year, when the country went to the polls to elect a president, he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Quite a few" ISAF troops had been wounded in fighting Saturday with insurgents, mostly in the southern provinces where the war is concentrated, he said.

Five Afghan soldiers and four Afghan police officers were killed, he said, adding that eight civilians were wounded "in election-related incidents".

By the time polling formally closed -- with some polling centres staying open until people queuing to vote had done so -- at least six civilians had also been reported killed in election-related violence.

Security was a major concern surrounding the election, after the Taliban threatened to attack polling centres, election workers and security forces.

WikiLeaks founder free to leave Sweden

AFP, Stockholm

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was free to leave Sweden, after prosecutors said there was no arrest warrant against him for an alleged case of rape, one of his lawyers said yesterday.

Bjorn Hurtig said an investigation was still under way but the head of the whistleblowing website had been given no summons for questioning.

"I have been told that there is no arrest warrant against him," meaning Assange could do what he liked, including going abroad, Hurtig said.

Sweden's director of prosecutions Marianne Ny said on September 1 she was reopening a rape probe against the Australian, who had an arrest warrant against him issued on August 20 but saw it withdrawn by another prosecutor the following day.

BP to complete sealing busted Gulf of Mexico well

AFP, Washington

BP sought yesterday to cap a months-long effort to end the worst maritime oil spill in US history after cementing in its ruptured Gulf of Mexico well.

A relief well successfully intersected a shaft at the bottom of the Macondo well some 2.5 miles (four kilometers) below the sea floor on Thursday, allowing the final injection procedure to go forward.

The delicate operation is supposed to permanently plug the well, bringing to a close a disaster that began nearly five months ago when an explosion ripped through the BP-leased Deepwater Horizon drilling rig, killing 11 workers.

The leak that followed fouled hundreds of miles of US shores, ruined local livelihoods and wiped nearly 70 billion dollars off BP's market value.

The British energy giant said it pumped cement into the busted well for seven hours on Friday. Workers were waiting for the cement to set before "standard plugging and abandonment procedures for the relief well" will go ahead so it can be finally, completely sealed.

"The DDII currently is on standby and

awaiting conclusion of DDIII cementing operations," BP spokesman Daren Beaudou told AFP, referring to the firm's Development Driller II and III rigs.

"The cement will be allowed to set and later tested in accordance with the approved operating plan."

The company said tests indicated no hydrocarbons or cement were present where the relief well -- one of two that have been drilled through bedrock since May -- finally intercepted the BP shaft.

"It is expected that the MC252 well will be completely sealed on Saturday," BP said.

No oil has gushed into the Gulf since July, when heavy drilling mud and cement were successfully rammed down the well from above and a cap was placed on the wellhead.

But BP and US President Barack Obama's administration have been adamant in stressing the need for the relief wells to provide a permanent solution, and to reassure Americans that BP's broken well would never again be a threat.

An estimated 4.9 million barrels (206 million gallons) of oil gushed out of the well off the coast of Louisiana after it ruptured following an April 20 explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon offshore oil platform.

Tens of thousands protest against German nuclear plan

AFP, Berlin

Tens of thousands demonstrated in Berlin yesterday against the government's proposal to extend the life of Germany's nuclear power plants for another decade or more.

Waving banners and balloons marked with the slogans of the anti-nuclear movement, they turned out in force to protest outside Chancellor Angela Merkel's headquarters.

The organisers -- environmental groups backed by left-leaning opposition parties -- put their numbers at 100,000, though police made it 37,000. Special trains and 150 buses had

been chartered to bring the demonstrators to Berlin from all over Germany.

Merkel's centre-right coalition on Sunday agreed to lift the deadline of 2022 for the phasing out of nuclear power set by an earlier Social Democrat-led government.

The new plan would extend the lifetime of Germany's 17 nuclear reactors for an average of 12 years beyond the previously scheduled shutdown.

Calculations in the German media suggest that the last plant will not be switched off until 2040, and critics say that operators may get away with keeping some running for even longer than that.

The government says the plan is necessary to maintain electricity supply until other renewable energy resources become available.

Even if the extension becomes law, the opposition Social Democrats (SPD), co-authors with the Greens of 2000's decision to exit nuclear power, said they will reverse Merkel's changes if they return to office.

With no permanent storage site for radioactive waste in place and fears about a repetition of a disaster in Germany like the Chernobyl meltdown in Ukraine in 1986, polls indicate a majority of voters oppose an extension.



Myanmar issues warning to Suu Kyi party

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar state media warned opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's party yesterday to drop protests against its dissolution, and threatened jail for anyone impeding the November vote.

Although the National League for Democracy (NLD) -- officially disbanded this week -- was not directly named, the report in the New Light of Myanmar said "a party" was "attempting to mislead the people into misunderstanding the law".

The article said the party was persuading people to "protest against the elections by boycotting" the November 7 vote, the first in two decades in the military-ruled nation.

It listed a host of prohibited activities, including "undue influence" to prevent a person from voting and "instigation, writing, distributing or using posters or attempting by other means to disturb voting".

These acts could "on conviction be punishable with imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or with fine not exceeding one hundred thousand kyats (1,000 dollars) or with both," it said.

Suu Kyi, who has been detained for much of the two decades since Myanmar's last election, is due to be released just days after the upcoming vote.

The Nobel peace laureate is barred from standing in the poll because she is a serving prisoner, and the NLD opted not to register because of rules that would have forced it to expel Suu Kyi and other members.

Is Your Heart as Healthy as You Think?

Find out now

- You may think all is well as there are no symptoms in early stages of heart disease. Often, the first and only symptom may be a major heart attack.
- Doctors at the National Heart Centre Singapore, the national specialist referral centre for cardiovascular disease in Singapore, advise that a heart health assessment is important as heart problems detected early can be treated to prevent or delay complications.

What does a Heart Health Screen involve?

- A basic assessment consists of a medical history review, a physical examination and tests such as ECG (electrocardiogram), chest x-ray, fasting lipid, glucose profiles and consultation with cardiologist.
- The results will alert you to your risk factors for heart disease and early heart conditions. Early awareness and intervention can prevent the condition from getting worse.

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- You should go for a heart screen if you are 40-45 years and above. If you have a family history of heart disease, an earlier start at 35 years is recommended.
- Depending on your individual medical history and risk profile, the screen should be done every one to five years.

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Myanmar residents of Japan stage a protest in Tokyo against Myanmar's ruling junta yesterday. Some 300 protesters demanded the release of all political prisoners including democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and called for a boycott of the November 7 election.