

International

Amid violence, Afghans register to vote in long-delayed elections

Power outage hits Kabul after militants attack pylon

KABUL: Afghanistan has begun registering voters across the war-torn country as it tries to ensure that long-delayed legislative elections scheduled for October are seen as credible and fraud-free. In an operation that began at the weekend and will last for two months, authorities hope to register up to 14 million adults at more than 7,000 polling centers—an ambitious goal in a country where militants control or contest much of the territory. “The main challenge is insecurity, particularly in rural areas,” Abdul Badie Sayad, chairman of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) said recently.

In addition to the Taliban and Islamic State group terrorizing swathes of the population, “local powers, illegal militias and strongmen will try to interfere” in the parliamentary and district council elections, Sayad predicted. A shortage of female staff at polling centers, particularly in conservative rural areas, could also impede participation by women in the polls, seen as a test run for next year’s presidential election. “Women won’t be given permission from their families to reach the registration centers, where they may be asked to remove their burqa to show their faces,” Sayad said.

In Kabul on Saturday police stood guard at a school being used as a registration centre but only a handful of men showed up. Mohammad Hussein, a 54-year-old shopkeeper, said he wanted to vote for a candidate “able to bring about change in this country”. “I voted in 2010 but I made a mistake—the MP didn’t bring any change. This time I need to vote for someone who works without taking bribes,” Hussein said. The turnout was no better yesterday when AFP returned to the registration centre, but IEC employee Abdul Samin said it would improve.

“I am sure once public awareness increases through the media and advertisements, then the registration process will

get busier,” Samin said. The October 20 polls were originally set to be held in 2015 following presidential elections the previous year, but were repeatedly pushed back due to security fears and logistical problems within the fragile unity government. If held, candidates will contest the 249 seats in the National Assembly for five-year terms. The country will also hold regional elections in tandem in hundreds of districts across Afghanistan—some of which are outside Kabul’s control.

‘Political chaos’ a risk

Over the coming weeks the IEC hopes to register 13-14 million people at centers where they will later be required to cast their vote, a move which officials hope will reduce the risk of ballot-box stuffing. A television advertising campaign has been launched to persuade people that their votes will count—a challenging task after a disputed presidential election in 2014.

“We are trying very hard to increase the confidence of the public, to increase the legitimacy of the elections,” Sayad said. Another hurdle to voter registration is the lack of national identification cards, or taskeras, particularly among women. Just over half the population has a taskera and the government hopes to issue another 10 million to enable more people to register to vote, officials have said. But there are concerns over how people living in areas controlled or contested by insurgents will be able to register and vote safely. Afghan security forces have been tasked with protecting polling centers, even as they struggle to get the upper hand against militants on the battlefield.

President Ashraf Ghani on Saturday called on the Taliban to take up his peace offer made in February to take part in the elections “as a political party”. So far the Taliban, which is expected to launch its traditional spring offensive in the coming weeks, has not responded to Ghani’s proposal. Despite international pressure on the government to hold



KABUL: Afghan women work with the Independent Election Commission (IEC) waiting to register residents at a voter registration center for the upcoming parliamentary and district council elections in Kabul. —AFP

elections this year, some question whether October will be too late. Holding the vote within months of the presidential poll risked “electoral congestion and political chaos”, Afghanistan Analysts Network’s Ali Yawar Adili warned in a report this month.

Power outage

In another development, a massive power outage in Kabul has left many residents of the Afghan capital with no lights or running water, officials said yesterday, after militants blew up an electricity pylon in the restive north. A pre-dawn attack Saturday on a transmission tower in Baghlan province left Kabul with 95 megawatts, less than a quarter of its normal power supply, said Wahid Tawhidi, a spokesman for power utility Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS).

Efforts to repair the pylon had so far failed as heavy fighting prevented a local DABS crew from reaching the site, Tawhidi said. “Today when our team tried to go to the area,

rockets were fired at their vehicles and they had to turn back,” he said. The provincial governor’s spokesman Mahmood Haqmal said Taliban fighters had used a mine to “bring down” the power line. “They have escaped the area but some of them are still in the mountains, preventing engineers from fixing the pylon,” Haqmal said. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told AFP that the militant group had “cut a cable in Baghlan province”.

This is the fourth outage in recent weeks caused by militant attacks on the power line transmitting electricity from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It has also affected neighboring Nangarhar and Parwan provinces, Tawhidi said. The Taliban warned last month that they would continue to cut power to Kabul unless their demands for electricity in areas under their control in Baghlan and Kunduz provinces were met. Residents in Kabul have been forced to make do with just an hour of electricity a day, sparking a firestorm of complaints on social media. —Agencies

North Korea marks the anniversary of birth of its founder

PYONGYANG: Thousands of North Korean devotees laid flowers before statues of the country’s founder Kim Il Sung yesterday on the anniversary of his birth. A constant stream of soldiers in brown uniforms, work unit personnel in suits, schoolchildren and families made their way to Mansu hill in the centre of Pyongyang, where giant statues of Kim and his son and successor look out over the capital.

“The great comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il will always be with us,” read a banner made of greenery. In turn each group—including the occasional set of tourists—approached the bronze edifices, most people with single blooms, some carrying golden baskets of flowers, making their offerings before assembling in formation. “Let us bow before the statues,” intoned an announcer half-hidden by horticulture, prompting deep bows from civilians and salutes from military detachments.

In front of the images stood a giant floral arrangement on a golden stand from Kim Jong Un, Kim Il Sung’s grandson and the third of the dynasty to head the isolated and impoverished but nuclear-armed country. North Koreans are taught from an early age to revere their leaders, and portraits of the two late rulers gaze down in every home, school and workplace in the country. The calendar is packed with anniversaries relating to them and their careers, and the accompanying rituals both demonstrate and reinforce loyalty to the regime. April 15, known as the Day of the Sun, is unquestionably the most important anniversary and is sometimes marked with a military parade, as it was last year.

Visiting the statues reinforced her determination to “realize the reunification of our country which the great leaders wanted” and “uphold the leadership of the respected Marshal Kim Jong Un”, said Second Lieutenant Ryu Yong Jong, 25, who has been in the army for nine years. Ordinary North Koreans only ever express wholehearted support for their government when speaking to foreign media. Later in the day, dancing parties—choreographed spectacles where citizens step and twirl to patriotic songs—were held, and crowds gathered on Kim Il Sung



PYONGYANG: People bow as they pay their respects before the statues of late North Korean leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, at Mansu hill in Pyongyang yesterday. —AFP

Square to watch fireworks light up the Juche Tower, the monument to Kim’s “self-reliance” philosophy that is the world’s tallest stone tower.

Heavy medal

Authorities held a mass meeting of senior officials on Saturday to mark the anniversary, but Kim Jong Un has spent some of the period on the current spate of diplomacy involving the two Koreas. A summit with the South’s President Moon Jae-in is due later this month, ahead of talks with Donald Trump. On Saturday Kim met visiting Chinese envoy Song Tao, pledging to improve a traditional but battered relationship. At a banquet for the delegation, one wall was decorated with a mural of Kim shaking hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping on his surprise trip to Beijing last month.

The journey was Kim’s first overseas since inheriting

power. It ensured that the first foreign head of state he met was the leader of the longstanding ally whose forces gave his grandfather crucial support in the Korean War. Senior officials including ceremonial head of state Kim Yong Nam yesterday visited Mangyongdae outside Pyongyang, where Kim Il Sung was born 106 years ago, the official KCNA news agency reported.

They “looked round the historical relics showing the noble traits of the President and his family members”, it added. Kim Il Sung remains the North’s Eternal President despite dying in 1994. His son passed away in 2011 but is still Eternal General Secretary of the ruling Workers’ Party of Korea. The Day of the Sun has been described as “Like Christmas, but for Juche instead of Jesus”. Guides at Mangyongdae sometimes use religious terminology themselves, describing a well at the site as containing “holy water” and calling the day his “birthdays”. —AFP

Skepticism as Myanmar announces return of first Rohingya family

YANGON: Myanmar’s government said it has repatriated the first family of Rohingya refugees, among the 700,000 who fled a brutal crackdown, but the move was slammed by rights groups as a publicity stunt which ignored warnings over the security of returnees. The stateless Muslim minority has been massing in squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh since the Myanmar army launched a ruthless campaign against the community in northern Rakhine state last August. The United Nations says the operation amounts to ethnic cleansing, but Myanmar has denied the charge, saying its troops targeted Rohingya militants.

Bangladesh and Myanmar vowed to begin repatriation in January but the plan

has been repeatedly delayed as both sides blame the other for a lack of preparation. According to a Myanmar government statement posted late Saturday, one family of refugees became the first to be processed in newly-built reception centers earlier in the day. “The five members of a family... came back to Taungpyawetwei town repatriation camp in Rakhine state this morning,” said a statement posted on the Information Committee’s Facebook page.

Bangladesh’s refugee commissioner, Mohammad Abul Kalam, told AFP the Rohingya family had been living in a camp erected on a patch of “no man’s land” between the two countries, meaning Dhaka had no formal role in their return. Several thousand Rohingya have been living in the zone since August, crammed into a cluster of tents beyond a barbed-wire fence that roughly demarcates the border. The rest of the refugees have settled in sprawling camps in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar district.

“The reality is that the repatriation has not started yet,” Bangladesh’s home minister Asaduzzaman Khan told AFP yesterday, adding that the single family’s return was “not a meaningful act”. “We don’t know when (repatriation) will start. They have not been able to create a ground for trust that they will take back these people,” he added. According to the Myanmar



MAUNGDAW: Myanmar immigration official hands over identification document to an unidentified five member Rohingya family. —AFP

statement, immigration authorities provided the family with National Verification Cards, a form of ID that falls short of citizenship and has been rejected by many Rohingya leaders who want full rights before they return.

Photos posted by the government showed one man, two women, a young girl and a boy receiving the ID cards and getting health checks. It said that the family had been sent to stay “temporarily” with relatives in Rakhine state’s Maungdaw town after “finishing the repatriation process”. Myanmar officials could not be

reached for more details. The Facebook post did not mention plans for further returnees expected in the near future.

The move comes amid warnings from the UN and other rights groups that repatriation of Rohingya would be premature, as Myanmar has yet to address the systematic legal discrimination and persecution the minority has faced for decades. The Rohingya are reviled by many in the Buddhist-majority country, where they are branded as illegal “Bengali” immigrants from Bangladesh, despite their deep roots in Rakhine state. —AFP

Chinese, Japanese ministers pave way for rare summits

TOKYO: The leaders of China and Japan are expected to pay reciprocal visits as relations between their countries warm, the Japanese foreign minister said yesterday. After rare talks with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, Taro Kono said the ministers had “forward-looking” and “fulfilling” discussions about rebuilding ties between the Asian powers. They agreed that Japan would host a trilateral summit between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, without setting a date. After such a meeting, they hoped to organize reciprocal visits by Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping, Kono said.

“We agreed to fully improve the bilateral relations through exchanges of the leaders ... with Premier Li’s visit at the time of the trilateral talks as the starting step,” Kono told reporters. However, Kono warned there would be “no true improvement of Japan-China relations without stability in the East China Sea”. “We agreed the importance of making it a sea of peace, cooperation and friendship,” he said. The world’s second and third largest economies have a fraught relationship, complicated by longstanding maritime disputes and Japan’s wartime legacy.

The dispute over islands in the East China Sea—known as the “Senkaku” in Japanese and the “Diaoyu” by the Chinese—remains a source of tension. But Tokyo is eager to get the relationship back on a firmer footing, especially as it fears being shut out of negotiations on North Korea’s nuclear program in which Beijing is likely to be a major player. China demonstrated its significant influence over its reclusive ally when Xi hosted the North’s leader Kim Jong-un and his wife in Beijing last month. With Moon and US President Donald Trump preparing for separate direct talks with Kim, Japan fears being left on the sidelines.

‘Complete denuclearization’

Kono, who visited Beijing in January, stressed that the two countries share the same goal on North Korea. “We had direct and in-depth discussions on North Korea in light of the current situation,” he told reporters after the meeting, without revealing details. “We confirmed that we shall continue our close coordination while also completely implementing related UN Security Council resolutions to realize the irreversible, verifiable and complete denuclearization of North Korea and its missiles.”

Wang, a former ambassador to Japan, said his visit was China’s response to “positive” messages and policies from Tokyo but acknowledged “some complex and sensitive elements”. “But together with Japan’s efforts... we would like to bring China-Japan relations back on a path of sustainable and normal development.” Abe, who is due to meet Trump in Florida on Tuesday to discuss North Korea, will meet Wang on Monday. The time is ripe for the two nations to improve relations to mark the 40th anniversary of their 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, both ministers said. Wang, who will be in Tokyo until Tuesday, will also take part in the fourth China-Japan High-level Economic Dialogue. —AFP