

International

Afghan voters defy attacks, delays to choose president

Tens of thousands of troops deployed to counter Taliban

KABUL: Afghans braved the threat of militant attacks and delays at polling booths to vote in a presidential election yesterday, a major test of the Western-backed government's ability to protect democracy against Taliban attempts to derail it. The election was marred by numerous small-scale Taliban attacks, but only one confirmed death. Turnout was low, however, with the violence - plus earlier Taliban threats against polling stations - likely contributing factors. Voting was extended by two hours, as the start of polling was delayed around the country with stations failing to open on time amid technical problems.

Independent election observers and activists said a slow pace to voting triggered confusion at some polling stations, with long queues forming outside. "It took the first voter 31 minutes to vote. For subsequent voters it was taking around five minutes and then it started to streamline to 3 minutes and 30 seconds," said Nishank Motwani, an observer stationed in Kabul. "Election commission staff looked panicked and voters were getting angry that the queue was not moving."

Taliban intervention?

Some observers feared the Taliban had forced a partial shutdown to upset the final results as the Independent Election Commission's (IEC), without giving a reason, said it had failed to establish contact with 901 of the 4,942 polling centers. The hardline Islamist group, which controls more of the country than at any time since its regime fell in 2001, has warned the more than 9 million registered voters to stay at home or face dire consequences.

Yesterday's presidential vote is the fourth since the Taliban were toppled. A dozen candidates are vying for the presidency, led by incumbent Ashraf Ghani and his former deputy Abdullah Abdullah. Due to logistical difficulties, results will not be known until Nov 7. The winner will play a crucial role in the country's quest to end the war with the Taliban and any resumption of talks between them and the United States that were called off this month. To protect

voters and polling stations, tens of thousands of troops were deployed. Abdul Moqim Abdulrahimzai, director-general of operations and planning at the Interior Ministry, said at least 21 civilians and two Afghan forces were injured in about a dozen small-scale attacks during the first hours of voting. Other attacks had been foiled, he said. A senior Western security official in Kabul said the Taliban had not conducted large-scale attacks but had scared some voters away. Early turnout was "very poor", said the Transparent Election Foundation of Afghanistan, also citing as a reason the requirement for voters to be photographed, to which female voters in conservative areas objected.

Others were determined to vote. "Bravado gets defined when one musters courage to cast ones vote," said Kabul doctor Roya Jahangir (after casting his ballot?). "We hope this time there is no fraud." Hundreds of voters complained their names were missing from voters' lists or the biometric devices used to prevent fraud. Addressing those concerns, the IEC eased restrictions, allowing anyone with election stickers on their national identity cards to vote.

Polling stations attacked

Small-scale Taliban attacks took place across the country. An explosion at a polling station in a mosque in the southern city of Kandahar wounded 16 people, according to a security source. In the northern province of Faryab, Afghan forces clashed with Taliban fighters in six districts, forcing people to stay indoors and refrain from voting. The Taliban said their fighters attacked polling stations in Laghman province, in eastern Afghanistan. Officials said four explosions in the eastern city of Jalalabad, in which one person was killed, disrupted voting at some stations. Blasts also hit Kabul and Ghazni, officials said, while more than 400 polling centers remained closed because they were in areas under Taliban control. Western diplomats said the scale of the Islamist militant group's election attacks would determine whether talks with Washington resumed. "Talks can only begin if the



KABUL: Afghan First Lady Rula Ghani (right), wife of Afghan President and candidate Ashraf Ghani looks on as she casts her vote at a polling station in Kabul. — AFP

Taliban exercises restraint and allows people to vote," said one diplomat overseeing the elections.

Ghani cast his ballot in a Kabul high school, telling reporters: "I thank God that today that people's vote will help the republic of Afghanistan to move forward." Abdullah voted at a different Kabul school. "The threats to innocent

people do not show the strength of the Taliban," he said. Both men came to power in 2014 after a bitterly contested election marred by fraud. Afghanistan's political scene is still tainted by the aftermath of that vote, which forced the two main rival groupings to form an unstable partnership. Both sides were accused of massive electoral cheating. — Reuters

Taliban cuts off his finger for voting, he 'defied them again'

KABUL: The Taliban cut off Safiullah Safi's right forefinger for voting in 2014. That did not stop the businessman from doing it again. Safi's act of defiance in Afghanistan's 2019 presidential elections yesterday sparked admiration after a photo of the 38-year old was posted on Twitter showing his missing right forefinger and the left one stained with indelible ink, indicating he had voted.

Braving the threat of militant attacks and delays at polling booths, Afghans cast their ballots in a major test of the Western-backed government's ability to protect democracy. The Taliban regime was overthrown by US-led forces in 2001. But the Islamic insurgency is now at its most powerful since its defeat, violently disrupting the nascent democracy's elections and carrying out gruesome, often deadly retribution on those who take part.

During the 2014 presidential vote, Taliban fighters cut off the fingers of at least six voters. "I know it was a painful experience, but it was only a finger," Safi said by telephone. "When it comes to the future of my children and country I will not sit back even if they cut off my whole hand." Safi described how in 2014 he had cast his vote and a day later travelled from the capital Kabul, where he lives, to the eastern city of Khost, his finger

marked by the ink from voting. "The Taliban took me out of the car and away from the road where they set up a court," he said. "They cut off my finger, asking why I had taken part in the election despite their warning... My family told me to not do it this time, but instead I took them all to cast our votes." The show of resistance was warmly met by Afghans on social media, many of whom fear a return to Taliban rule and the end of democracy and hard-won freedoms.

"He voted in support of democracy and for saying no to the Taliban system," said Twitter user Kabuli. In the parts of Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban, a larger territory now than at any point since 2001, voting is especially fraught with danger and turnout tends to be very low. The insurgents shut down many voting centers in a show of their authority. — Reuters

Haiti gripped by violent protests against president

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Angry protests rumbled through Haiti and its capital of Port-au-Prince Friday as thousands of people took to the streets against President Jovenel Moïse, drawing tear gas from police as demonstrators looted and threw stones. Protesters took over a police station in the impoverished Cite Soleil neighborhood, making off with sheet metal roofing, furniture and police protection equipment, only slightly slowed by the air wafting with tear gas.

"Now we are taking whatever we need to better our homes because we are tired of getting soaked when it rains," said Steven Edgard, a protester. In the early hours of the day, groups of young people prevented traffic from circulating on some of Port-au-Prince's main arteries. Lamp posts, burning tires, tree trunks and piles of trash were used to create barricades under the helpless gaze of police patrols.

Violent clashes later broke out as protesters threw stones in response to tear gas. Shots were also heard ringing out from the melee. After the demonstrators were dispersed, several shops were looted in the wealthiest areas of the capital. The day's demonstrations were part of a larger wave of protests that have rocked Haiti throughout the week as the country's inhabitants voiced anger over Moïse, who is implicated in several corruption scandals.

Protesters rejected a "truce" proposed by Moïse in a rare address broadcast to the nation on Wednesday, in which he appealed for national reconciliation and a unity government. In June, judges of Haiti's High Court of Auditors said in a report that Moïse was at the center of an "embezzlement scheme" that had siphoned off Venezuelan aid money intended for road repairs, laying out a litany of examples of corruption and mismanagement.

The aid money came through Venezuela's PetroCaribe program, which had allowed Haiti to buy petroleum products at discount and on credit but which was plagued by allegations of corruption. However, the program has now been suspended for more than a year because of deteriorating relations between Venezuela and the United States. The suspension has meant that Haiti's long-suffering population has been faced with an extra burden: an ever-worsening fuel shortage that has resulted in closed service stations, rising prices and long lines to buy petrol.

Police gone

Gary Desrosiers, a spokesman for the police said that all measures were taken to "avoid clashes with the population" and that elite SWAT agents had evacuated officers at the looted police station after the protests began. The police had taken all of their weapons so that protesters could not abscond with them, he said. "We did not want the police to come out of their base because this is a unit that fired real bullets at the people, that uses tear gas grenades when all people want is to be respected," said Edgard, the protester. One of the poorest countries in the Americas, three-fifths of Haiti's population lives below the poverty line of \$2 a day. — AFP

Biometric machines in Afghan vote improve

KABUL: Biometric machines aimed at preventing fraud in Afghanistan's presidential election performed better than in a poll last year but still left voters waiting a long time to cast their ballots, election observers said yesterday. The machines were used for the first time in the October parliamentary poll, when many malfunctioned or failed to work altogether. Chaos during that vote was blamed on the machines' performance, along with incomplete voting lists and delays in holding the election.

The Independent Election Commission (IEC) decided to use the machines during the presidential election but gave staff more training and issued spare batteries for the devices at each of the polling centers in a country with chronic power shortages. Polling stations, which each had one device, had paper registration forms as backup in case biometric verification failed.

"The technology improved a little bit, so it is not as bad as the parliamentary election," said Naem Ayubzada, director of Transparent Election Foundation of Afghanistan, which observed polls in all 34 provinces. He said machines could still take up to 10 minutes to identify a voter, although he said problems of identification were often the result of registration problems, while some women were deterred by the machines' facial recognition software. In conservative areas of Afghanistan, most adult women and older girls cover their faces outside the home.

The machines, made by Germany's Dermalog Identification Systems, use fingerprint scans and photos to identify voters before they cast their ballots to reduce fraud that has been widespread in Afghan votes since the 2001 fall of the Taliban. "The process is too lengthy," Shaharazad Akbar, head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, said on Twitter about the biometric identification process. Hava Alam Nuristani, head of the IEC, said any issues with the machines would be addressed in future. Dermalog could not be reached for comment outside normal German office hours. — Reuters



MAZAR-I-SHARIF: An Independent Election Commission (IEC) official scans a voter's face with a biometric device at a polling station in Mazar-i-Sharif yesterday. — AFP



PALU: Survivors of the 2018 earthquake-triggered tsunami attend a mass prayer to commemorate the disaster in Palu, Central Sulawesi yesterday. — AFP

Thousands attend mass prayer in the quake ravaged Palu

PALU: Thousands attended a mass prayer in the devastated Indonesian city of Palu yesterday, one year after a quake-tsunami swallowed up whole neighborhoods and killed more than 4,000 people. Many in the crowd sobbed as they remembered victims of the 7.5 magnitude quake and subsequent deluge that razed swathes of the coastal city on Sulawesi island last September.

Some 4,300 people were listed as dead or missing while nearly 60,000 people are still living in makeshift accommodation after their homes were destroyed, according to the Red Cross. The force of the impact saw entire neighborhoods leveled, with the earth turning to quicksand. Elsa Lawira, whose seven-year-old son died in the disaster, was among some 3,000 people at Saturday's vigil, which was held in badly-hit Balaroa district.

"The past year has been traumatic," the 36-year-old Lawira told AFP as she sobbed. "My only wish is that God will protect my son and a disaster like this never happens again." Former Balaroa resident Lusiana lost her mother, father, and a sibling in the double catastrophe. "My life has been just empty this past year," she said.

The disaster also destroyed fishing boats, shops, and irrigation systems, robbing many locals of their income. Rebuilding has been slow, and some people still living in temporary shelters-wonder if they'll ever have a home again. "I've been living in this tent since the quake struck," said Ela, a mother of four. "It's been really hard. My kids got sick, it's hot and sometimes we have to sleep on wet ground after it rains. The kids' father is still working but we can't afford to buy mattresses," she added.

Nani, another mother of four kids, said her home was destroyed. "I don't know if I'm going to get permanent housing," she added. Hundreds of damaged schools across the region have not been repaired. Many "are so badly affected they remain too dangerous to use, forcing children to learn in temporary classrooms where they have to attend in shifts due to a lack of space," Save the Children said Saturday. Earlier the World Bank offered the country up to \$1 billion in loans to get the city back on its feet.

Indonesia is one of the most disaster-prone nations on earth because it straddles the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire, where tectonic plates collide. The Southeast Asian archipelago is also dotted with more than 100 volcanoes, including one that erupted between Java and Sumatra in late 2018 and unleashed a tsunami that killed more than 400 people. On Boxing Day 2004, a 9.1-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Sumatra and triggered a tsunami that killed 220,000 across the Indian Ocean region, including around 170,000 in Indonesia. — AFP