

International

Attacks, fraud fears dampen turnout in Afghanistan's poll

Insurgents push offensive, conducting a string of bombings

KABUL: Voter participation in Afghanistan's presidential elections appeared yesterday to have been lower than in previous years, with turnout hit by the threat of attacks, a muted campaign and concerns of fraud. Afghans went to the polls Saturday to vote in the first round of a presidential race that will decide whether President Ashraf Ghani will win a second five-year term.

About 9.6 million Afghans in the war-torn nation - with an estimated population of 35 million - had registered to vote in the election, which was held at some 4,900 polling stations. An initial tally released yesterday by Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission showed that with data from slightly more than half the stations, just under 1.1 million people had voted. If that turnout trend holds, it would represent a participation level of less than 25 percent - lower than any of Afghanistan's three previous presidential elections.

In 2014, for instance, turnout was a little under 50 percent, although direct comparisons are tough because previous polls were tainted by allegations of systemic fraud. Authorities heralded Saturday's election as a success because the Taliban were unable to pull off a large-scale attack resulting in high casualty numbers, and there were fewer technical difficulties than some had feared. But the insurgents nonetheless pushed their offensive on the democratic process, conducting a string of bombings at polling stations and engaging Afghan security forces in clashes across the country.

According to the Afghanistan Analysts Network, which compiled incidents through various sources, more than 400 attacks had been reported over the course of the election day. The Taliban claimed to have conducted

531 attacks, while the interior ministry said "the enemy" had carried out 68 assaults. The official death toll is five security forces. But in years past, authorities have suppressed information on election day only to later give larger numbers.

'Much cleaner'

Still, Shahar Zad Akbar, who heads the Afghan government's Independent Human Rights Commission, said she breathed "a sigh of relief" that the election had gone smoothly compared to previous years. "The Afghan security forces really showed a real capability in managing the security situation across Afghanistan in ensuring people have access to polling centers," she said. But turnout was also hampered by skepticism about the electoral process. Previous polls, including the 2014 presidential election, were undermined by widespread allegations of vote-buying, ballot stuffing and fraud.

And the election campaign itself seemed almost moribund during the two months of campaigning because many thought the poll - already twice delayed while the US and the Taliban tried to negotiate a troop withdrawal deal - would be pushed back yet again. It was only after US President Donald Trump scuppered those talks on September 7 that candidates really believed the election would take place, leaving little time for them to campaign. Turnout was low because of security threats and "the weak campaigning of the candidates" political analyst and Kabul academic Atta Noori said. "It is not because they were not interested to vote," he said.

Independent political analyst Haroun Mir said that even with a low turnout, the election could be considered a vic-



KABUL: Youths walk at Wazir Akbar Khan hilltop overlooking Kabul yesterday. Voter participation in Afghanistan's presidential elections appeared to have been lower than in previous years, with turnout hit by the threat of attacks, a muted campaign and concerns of fraud. — AFP

tory for the democratic process because it was "much cleaner" than previous polls. Election officials have said the result would be the purest yet, with equipment such as biometric fingerprint readers and better training for poll

workers ensuring the vote was fair. Results are not expected until October 19. Candidates need more than 50 percent of the vote to be declared outright winner, or else the top two will head for a second round in November. — AFP

Kashmir crisis leaves lucrative apple orchards to rot

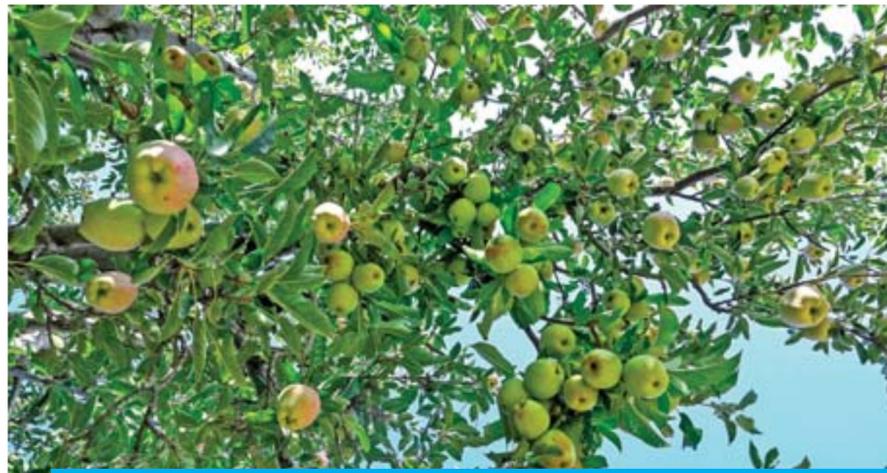
SHOPIAN: Farmers in Kashmir are deliberately leaving their apples to rot, undermining the restive territory's most lucrative export as bitterness towards the Indian government grows. New Delhi has deployed tens of thousands of extra troops since early August, when it scrapped the region's decades-old semi-autonomous status, and brought in a communications blockade that cut off Kashmiris from the outside world.

Political leaders and thousands of civilians have been arrested, with allegations of torture and abuse levelled at authorities - which deny them - and protests have since raged. Either in anger or at the urging of local militants, farmers have joined in the rebuke of India's actions by deliberately sabotaging a crop vital to the local economy. The fertile Himalayan region usually sells hundreds of millions of dollars worth of apples each year, and more than half of Kashmiris are engaged directly or indirectly in cultivation.

At one orchard in central Shopian district, Ghulam Nabi Malik and his brother usually sell 7,000 boxes of apples a year for markets and kitchen tables across India, earning them some seven million rupees (nearly \$100,000). Their land is now idle, with branches sagging under the weight of unpicked fruit. "Let it rot on the trees," Malik said. Amid the latest unrest, Malik told AFP that harvesting would allow the Indian government "to tell the world that everything is fine in Kashmir". And everything, he says, is far from fine.

'Ready to sacrifice'

Militants have circulated letters and stuck posters outside mosques, appealing to orchard owners not to harvest and instead join the "resistance". "Apple growers and students are ready to sacrifice this year and not betray the blood of martyrs," reads one such notice, nailed to a wooden post and signed by a local rebel commander.



MALIKGUND: Apples are ready to be harvested in an orchard in Shopian district of southern Kashmir valley. — AFP

Many farmers say they are willing participants in the campaign, although there have been threats and one orchard owner - a local bigwig close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party - was attacked. In one village, a former police officer who deserted to join a rebel group set fire to empty boxes his own family had bought for packing fruit. Militants have also put pressure on fuel stations, forcing off the roads many trucks needed to transport the fruit.

But locals insisted to AFP that the insurgents were not the reason for abandoning what they say is a bumper crop this year. "To leave the ripe apples rotting on the trees is the only form of protest we can do under the current circumstances," Malik said. People say they are more frightened of Indian security forces, who often haul away young men from villages at night. "There is fear (of the militants), but it's not like the fear of the state forces," said one villager who declined to be named, fearing reprisal.

Security measures

Modi says that with tens of thousands killed in Kashmir's 30-year-old anti-India insurgency, his govern-

ment has acted to end "a vicious cycle of terrorism, violence, separatism and corruption". New Delhi says most Kashmiris support its move but are scared to say so out of fear of "terrorists" backed by arch-rival Pakistan, which has fought two wars with India over the territory.

The state government has tried to resolve the situation with the apples by promising security for growers and offering to buy apples directly. It insists these measures are working. Deliveries of apples to market were only down by around 25 percent, said Metharam Kriplani of the New Delhi-based Kashmir Apple Merchants Association. The "biggest problem" facing buyers was the lack of phone lines as a result of the region's communications lockdown, he said.

But growers that spoke to AFP have refused the offer of government support, and fruit markets in Shopian and elsewhere in Kashmir are empty - despite some traders claiming that local authorities attempted to browbeat them into opening as normal. The authorities "threatened that they would destroy the shops (at the market) if we didn't open. But the market is deserted," said Bashir Ahmad Bashir, head of the local fruit-growers association. — AFP

Thousands rally in Moscow to demand release of protesters

MOSCOW: Thousands of Russians rallied in Moscow yesterday to demand the release of protesters jailed in what Kremlin opponents says is a campaign to stifle dissent. The protesters were arrested during demonstrations since July against the exclusion of many opposition candidates from a local election, and allegations of police brutality and what many Muscovites saw as harsh jail sentences have sparked an unusual public outcry.

Several people were sentenced to up to four years, and others are being prosecuted, for crimes such as violence against police officers. In a rare step following the outcry, courts freed one person on bail and dropped charges against another. But President Vladimir Putin's opponents say the moves may be a tactic to avoid wider concessions and want to step up pressure for others to be freed.

Opposition politician Leonid Volkov said a high turnout yesterday would compel the government to release more people. "If there are 50,000 people, they'll let everyone out," Volkov wrote on Twitter ahead of the rally. Protesters filed through metal detectors under light rain, waving flags from an array of opposition groupings of starkly different political stripes. A crowd of 18,000 people had been counted 30 minutes after the start of the rally, according to the White Counter group which monitors political protests.

The rally has been authorized by the Moscow mayor's office, meaning mass detentions by police are less likely to happen. The series of protests began in July when more than a dozen opposition-minded candidates were not allowed to run in a Sept. 8 election to Moscow's city legislature on a technicality. The police says people were detained or prosecuted for breaking the law and that the protests had to be dispersed as they had not been authorized and were illegal.

After his allies were barred from the vote, opposition leader Alexei Navalny called on supporters to vote tactically for opponents of the ruling United Russia party, regardless of their political stripe. United Russia, which supports Putin, lost a third of its seats in the Moscow city assembly, a setback for the authorities that Navalny said was a victory for the Kremlin's opponents even though the governing party kept its majority. The rallies were the largest sustained protest movement in Moscow in almost a decade, peaking at around 60,000 people, before appearing to lose momentum. — Reuters

Death toll in east Indonesia quake rises to 30

JAKARTA: The death toll from a strong earthquake in Indonesia's eastern province of Maluku has risen to 30 people, the national disaster mitigation agency (BNBP) said yesterday, and hundreds of thousands of people remain in evacuation shelters. The 6.5 magnitude quake hit early on Thursday, damaging hundreds of houses and dozens of public facilities and infrastructure, including the main bridge in the city of Ambon.

Officials on Thursday had put the death toll at 20 people. Many were killed by falling rubble. More than 150 people were injured, BNBP spokesman Agus Wibowo said in a statement on Sunday, and over 200,000 remain in shelters. Those whose houses were destroyed have set up tents as shelters in near hospitals or school yards. People living near the ocean have evacuated to higher ground following the quake, fearing a tsunami, despite authorities have ruled out the possibility of a giant wave. Indonesia, which sits on the seismically active Pacific Ring of Fire, is often hit by deadly earthquakes and tsunamis. — Reuters

Nations that make weapons, foment migration but refuse the refugees: Pope

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis yesterday scolded countries that produce weapons for wars fought elsewhere and then refuse to take in refugees fleeing the very same conflicts. The 82-year-old Argentine pope, whose parents were of Italian immigrant stock, has made the defense of migrants and refugees a plank of his pontificate and he has often clashed over immigration policy with US President Donald Trump and populist anti-immigrant politicians in Europe.

Francis has also criticized the arms trade repeatedly and his sermon for 40,000 people in St Peter's Square yesterday linked the issues of war and migration as the Roman Catholic Church marked its World Day of Migrants and Refugees. "Wars only affect some regions of the world, yet weapons of war are produced and sold in other regions which are then unwilling to take in the refugees generated by these conflicts," Francis said.

Yesterday's Mass was attended by many immigrants and groups helping them. It was also marked by a mix of African, Spanish and Portuguese music as well as traditional Church music. Francis said the world is becoming increasingly "elitist and cruel towards the excluded", adding that it is the duty of Christians to look after all those left behind in a "throwaway culture" taking root in society. "This means being a neighbor to all those who are mistreated and abandoned on the streets of our world,



VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis attends the unveiling of a sculpture called 'Angels Unaware' by Canadian sculptor Timothy P Schmaiz (right) depicting a group of 140 migrants of various cultures and from different historic times, following a mass for World Day of Migrants and Refugees at St Peter's Square. — AFP

soothing their wounds and bringing them to the nearest shelter, where their needs can be met," he said. People could not remain indifferent to "the bleak isolation, contempt and discrimination experienced by those who do not

belong to 'our' group", the pope said. Francis then inaugurated a large statue in St Peter's Square, showing dozens of migrants and refugees from different faiths and different periods of history. — Reuters