

The National



Kabul car bomber strikes near Nato office

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KABUL // A suicide car bomber negotiated his way past checkpoints and concrete blast barriers before detonating an explosion yesterday, killing seven people in the heavily fortified diplomatic district of the Afghan capital.

The attack is being viewed as an attempt to generate fear among citizens just days before the presidential election, so as to deter them from voting amid concerns of possible election fraud and corruption.

Taliban claimed responsibility for the bombing. It said the target was the US Embassy.

About 100 people were reportedly injured in the blast outside the gate of the Nato's military headquarters. Security forces quickly sealed off the area.

Owners of nearby shops were seen cleaning shattered glass off pavement that was splattered with blood. Two men, one with a bandage around his head and the other with an injury in the leg, propped each other up as they limped away from the scene.

The bomb was detonated at 8.30am, half an hour after officials at the Nato headquarters and the nearby ministry of transport arrived for work.

"The blast was so powerful it shook the whole building," a ministry employee told Agence France-Presse.



Many international organisations put their staff under lockdown in the aftermath of the blast, a potent symbol of the insecurity that threatens to undermine the credibility of the election.

The Taliban have scaled up attacks on provincial government buildings. On February 11, they launched commando-style raids on in the capital, killing 19 people. The militants have threatened violence on the election day.

Norine MacDonald, the president of the International Council on Security and Development, said the Taliban had been sending "night letters" warning people not to vote. They threatened to cut off the fingers of those found with indelible ink that is to be used at polling stations. The ink lasts up to a week, she pointed out.

While the Taliban control large swathes of Helmand, its capital Lashkar Gah is also "completely riddled with insurgents" despite the imposing presence of British troops.

Ms MacDonald, who is based in Lashkar Gah, said the international community was asking Afghans to stand up against the Taliban by casting their ballots.

"They can't guarantee their safety against that threat," she said. "So they're basically saying, 'Please take the risk and vote.'" She pointed out that with 7,000 polling stations scattered across the country, "we're just creating 7,000 targets".

Many of those polling stations will be without independent observers, she added, leaving them open for fraud.

Bill Gallery, a senior programme officer with Democracy International, said his organisation was sending international observers to some of the south's most volatile provinces. Its security team will decide on the election day whether it is safe for observers to leave the main cities.

“One big problem is that we're not necessarily going to know what is going on in rural areas, especially in the south,” he said.

With media reports of a lively trade in fake voting cards, it is possible that corrupt or intimidated officials at polling stations without observers could stuff ballot boxes, Mr Gallery added.

“Everyone recognises that this is not going to be a perfect election,” he said. “The standard is whether it will be good enough to be accepted both domestically and internationally.”

The answer to that question could largely be determined by the size of the turnout in the south, where the Taliban exert maximum influence and where Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's president, commands much support from his fellow Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group in the area.

If Pashtuns, who make up 42 per cent of the population, largely stay at home on the day of the election, it would be hard to argue that the election was representative.

Partly because of the large possibility of a low voter turnout in the south, many are predicting that Mr Karzai will not pull in enough votes to avoid a second round of election.

If Mr Karzai declared winner after the first round, supporters of Abdullah Abdullah, his closest rival, will suspect the election has been rigged, Ms MacDonald said.

“There's lots of Abdullah supporters who say they will not stand for another Karzai government.”

Many Abdullah supporters she has spoken to were inspired by recent post-election demonstrations in Iran, seeing them as an example of how to react to election results they do not believe.

Afghanistan, however, does not have a history of peaceful street demonstrations or a well-trained police force. It rather has a deeply entrenched organised criminal network that could take advantage of the instability.

“If you look at all of that objectively, there are lots of ways it could go horribly wrong,” she said.

Her organisation recently issued a report calling on the international community to develop a contingency plan to prevent unrest in the event of disputed elections.

“If there is a plan it's a secret, because nobody's seen it,” she said.

Ms MacDonald added that despite all the problems this election poses, many of the democracy-building efforts behind it had been successful. She said she had interviewed 250 men and asked whether they would let their wives vote and all of them said “yes”.

Poll results released in May by the International Republican Institute, which is affiliated to the US Republican Party, found that more than 40 per cent of Afghans would vote for a female president, and 57 per cent for a female parliamentary candidate.

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