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## Afghan election an early test of Obama's war plan

By ANNE GEARAN

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(08-15) 06:08 PDT WASHINGTON, (AP) --

Barack Obama's new Afghanistan war plan is facing its first major test, and it's not on the battlefield.

The president has called next Thursday's election the most important event all year in Afghanistan. The first phase of the reordered counterinsurgency strategy Obama announced in March is hinged to it, and the U.S. is taking no chances, pressing a new military offensive this week to make sure the voting comes off well.

The Taliban has warned it will disrupt the election, including threats of suicide bombings of polling places. Wide turnout would be a symbolic rejection of the insurgency, and the U.S. is hoping for more than token participation in districts recently under the Taliban thumb.

It's not about who wins the election, the White House says. Rather the voting is a test of the ability of U.S. forces to protect civilians — the new top military priority — and the willingness of voters to accept that help. The success of the revised strategy depends on winning the trust of civilians.

U.S. officials stress that the elections are being run by Afghans, hoping the country will embrace the results as homegrown rather than the result of foreign fixers. However, that could leave the Afghan government holding the bag if voters see the results as illegitimate.

Duplicate registrations, suspiciously high registration figures and other problems ahead of the election suggest possible fraud.

Incumbent President Hamid Karzai is expected to win re-election, though he is seen as weak by many Afghans and international backers alike, and too tolerant of corruption and cronyism. The Obama administration has distanced itself somewhat from Karzai but has tried not to appear too close to any of his competitors, either.

Obama sent 17,000 additional combat troops to Afghanistan in the spring and summer to help blunt a resurgent Taliban ahead of the voting, and his administration is spending millions to help an underperforming Afghan government run a relatively safe and open election.

About 400 Marines opened a large offensive in southern Afghanistan just this week to uproot Taliban fighters, disrupt intimidation campaigns ahead of the voting and help provide protected passage to the polls.

Before the U.S. Marines arrived, insurgents had papered one dust-blown town with notes warning that voting would mean a slit throat.

"It looks like more Afghans will be able to vote than had been the case before the recent deployment of additional U.S. forces," Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Thursday.

"They're obviously holding an election in adverse circumstances," Gates said, but thousands more polling places are slated to be open than during the last national voting five years ago. Millions more Afghans are registered to vote.

Afghan election officials have not yet determined how many of the nation's 7,000 polling places can be secured. Hundreds are likely to remain shut because of fears of violence.

There are over 100,000 U.S. and NATO troops in the country as well as 175,000 Afghan soldiers and police, spread over a country of 33 million people, most of them living in scattered pockets with rugged terrain and few roads.

"While we encourage every Afghan to exercise his right to vote, who he or she votes for is none of our business," said Brig. Gen. Larry Nicholson, the Marine commander overseeing the sweep.

Obama aides say the election is a crucial measure of Afghan confidence in the U.S.-backed government. Key elements of the U.S. plan such as attacking official corruption and improving local government cannot begin in earnest until voters pick new provincial leaders and a president.

"A government needs legitimacy," said White House special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, especially since the election has been delayed for four months — well past a date mandated in the constitution that U.S. advisers helped the Afghans write.

"The decision to ignore the constitution and delay the election has caused a reorientation of our priorities for the first six and a half months of this administration," Holbrooke said during a discussion Wednesday at the Center For American Progress.

Holbrooke will be in Afghanistan for the election, along with scores of U.S. civilian election specialists and monitors.

"Most people think President Karzai is going to win the election. Not a lot of people think the election is going to be fair," said David Kilcullen, a counterinsurgency expert and incoming adviser to the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan.

"One of the things I think we're going to see after the 20th of August is President Karzai returning to power but with substantially reduced legitimacy. You may actually see a spike of violence after the election as people react to that."

Insurgent attacks are already rising in Afghanistan, which U.S. commanders attribute partly to efforts to derail the election and partly to the fact that U.S. and NATO forces are pressing farther into former Taliban sanctuaries.

Deaths among U.S. and other NATO troops have soared. With 74 foreign troops killed — including 43 Americans — July was the deadliest month for international forces since the start of the war in 2001.

Andrew Exum, a counterinsurgency specialist who helped prepare a forthcoming assessment of the war by the commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, added another caution.

"I fear popular unrest following a perceived illegitimate election more than I fear external violence," he said.