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## \$600 for a Kalashnikov – a sign of bloodshed to come in Afghanistan

Surging demand for weapons raises fears of violence as allegations of vote-rigging by Karzai grow

By Kim Sengupta in Kabul

September 2, 2009

The price of Kalashnikovs has doubled in Afghanistan. For a country awash with arms, the fact that the weapons are now fetching \$600 apiece is a cause of some surprise, but a surge of demand is to blame for the increase, with a steady stream of weapons said to be heading for the north.

This is the Tajik constituency of Abdullah Abdullah, the presidential candidate who claims the election is being stolen by the incumbent Western-backed President, Hamid Karzai.

The arms shipments are a source of alarm in a country where political stand-offs have often been settled at the point of a gun. Few Western diplomats claim there is an immediate danger of civil war but tensions are mounting after polls which have been mired in bitterness and recrimination.

In the next few days, Mr Karzai is expected to pass the 50 per cent of the votes he needs to avoid a second round of polling and to retain the presidency.

The demographic factors all point towards this. Mr Karzai has 46 per cent of the votes, counted predominantly from the north and west which should be the stronghold of Dr Abdullah, the former foreign minister who trails with 33 per cent.

The ballots yet to be tallied will be from the Pashtun south and east, in which the President is the overwhelming favourite to win.

Mr Karzai's opponents are putting their faith in more than 2,500 complaints of voting irregularities – 691 of them described as serious charges – that the complaints commission has received. Most of them emanate from the south – The Independent witnessed what appeared to be flagrant fraud at Nad-e-Ali in Helmand, with ballot stuffing on behalf of the President.

Investigators say many of the complaints will be difficult to prove and even if officials are found guilty of malpractice, the penalty would be fines and disbarment from taking part in future elections rather than the wholesale discounting of votes.

Analysts point out that even if the commission decided that votes from some polling stations in the Pashtun belt were invalid, Mr Karzai would be the overwhelming beneficiary of the ones still considered valid.

Western powers, whose soldiers are fighting and dying in Afghanistan, supposedly so democracy takes root, are embarrassed by the apparent fraud.

The Obama administration, which has taken a noticeably harder stance against Mr Karzai than the Bush White House, is said to prefer a second-round run-off between Mr Karzai and Dr Abdullah to at least maintain the appearance of probity. During Mr Karzai's tempestuous 19-minute meeting last week with Richard Holbrooke, the US envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, the American diplomat is said to have stated: "Too many votes have been stolen by your side, there has to be a second round" prompting Mr Karzai to storm out. Mr Holbrooke's officials maintain that the talks were amicable.

Yet, according to some analysts, a second round would be seen as having been engineered by the Americans and would lead to deep Pashtun resentment. "The Americans are fighting in the south, killing Pashtuns, they are pressing for a second round to prevent a Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, from being President as long as possible. This may be simplistic but it is how a lot of Pashtuns will look at this," said one analyst, Waheed Mujhda.

"It will look like interference by the West, especially by the Americans. It will not be good for the country."

Fellow analyst Zalmay Afzhali said: "Some people in America have their views about Mr Karzai. But he is an Afghan and the fact is that we are having these elections which have mainly gone off peacefully, with him in charge."

One reason that Mr Karzai appears to have done well in the north is because of block votes secured for him by allies Mohammed Fahim and Abdul Rashid Dostum, ex-warlords and power-brokers in the region.

But Mr Mujhda said that consensus may fall apart if there was a second round. "Then the voting would be Pashtun versus Tajik, south versus north, and there is definitely a fear that this may spread into violence."

In the Panjshir Valley, the heartland of the Northern Alliance where Dr Abdullah fought beside Ahmed Shah Masoud, the legendary commander murdered by al-Qa'ida at the behest of the Taliban, a former Mujaheddin fighter said the Tajiks would not tolerate being deprived by a fraudulent poll.

At his home, as he unwrapped an oiled cloth to show off a Kalashnikov and a Glock pistol, the former Mujahedeen commander Gul Shah Mohammed declared: "We know how to use these weapons, we haven't forgotten how to fight."