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Reuters

Taliban urge Afghan vote boycott, warn of violence

By Jonathon Burch and Sayed Salahuddin

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The Taliban renewed a warning on Thursday they would try to disrupt Afghanistan's parliamentary poll and urged a boycott, while poll monitors said the electoral watchdog had not acted forcefully enough against fraud.

Fears of violence and fraud are hanging over Saturday's vote, in which almost 2,500 candidates are vying for 249 seats in the wolesi jirga or lower house of parliament. Afghanistan's own election watchdog has warned of a "disputatious" process.

The poll is a test of stability ahead of President Barack Obama's strategy review in December, which will likely examine the pace and scale of U.S. troop withdrawals.

President Hamid Karzai's credibility with his allies is also on the line, after a fraud-marred presidential vote last year, with some observers warning that a repeat of that drawn-out poll would strain relations and could play into the Taliban's hands.

"The electoral authorities have learned many lessons from the experience of last year, in particular in improving their systems to prevent massive fraud," United Nations envoy Staffan de Mistura said in a statement issued in Kabul.

"These elections will not be perfect, but I am hopeful that they will be better than last year's election," he said.

The hardline Islamist Taliban repeated a warning that they would unleash violence during the poll, in which there are 11.4 million eligible voters.

"We call on our Muslim nation to boycott this process and thus foil all foreign processes and drive away the invaders from your country by sticking to jihad and Islamic resistance," the group said in a statement.

In the eastern city of Jalalabad, several hundred protesters demanding more polling stations clashed with police.

"This is a government plot and they are doing this deliberately. They don't want these people to succeed in the election. They are mistreating us and we want more polling stations," demonstrator Gulab Shah told Reuters Television.

In southern Uruzgan, troops shot a protester armed with an assault rifle who tried to enter a coalition military outpost.

The protester's condition was not known since others dragged him away, said James Judge, a spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

MISCONDUCT

Karzai's government says it can provide security for all voters on Saturday, with the support of 150,000 foreign troops as backup. However, the government election watchdog said two election workers were gunned down on Wednesday in the north.

The independent Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) criticized the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), a U.N.-backed oversight panel, for taking too little decisive action against government voting misconduct.

Out of more than 580 registered complaints, 310 were against government officials, FEFA said.

"We are not encouraged by the level of action by the ECC against the government officials," FEFA Chairman Nader Naderi told reporters. "They did take some measures ... but they needed to be much more aggressive in addressing this serious issue."

The ECC will have to adjudicate potentially thousands of complaints, a large number of which could delay the results of the ballot. No results are expected before October 8, with the final outcome not due before October 30.

The government urged news media on Wednesday not to report on what it termed electoral shortcomings or objections to the process and militant attacks targeting voting.

Abdullah Abdullah, runner-up to Karzai in last year's presidential poll, told reporters that if the elections were rigged this time around, it would strengthen the insurgency and break Afghans' trust in democracy.

"The trust will disappear, and then, what's the option for the people? The people will be left between a corrupt government and a violent Taliban, with no way out," he said.

Candidates have complained of intimidation and police indifference. At least four contestants have been killed and dozens of supporters wounded. Female candidates in particular have been at risk in the deeply conservative Muslim nation.

"The Afghan security forces must ensure that voters and candidates are given adequate security," rights group Amnesty International said. "Everyone, including women, should be able to participate without fear of attacks and threats."

The United Nations has told about a third of its international staff to leave or stay out of Afghanistan until after the election, due to Taliban threats, U.N. spokesman Kieran Dwyer said.

The decision affects about 300 people, but does not apply to the 170 employees brought in to help with the election, he said.