

# TheNational

## Bloodshed escalates as Afghan vote draws near

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MAZAR-E-SHARIF, AFGHANISTAN // A day of bloodshed preceded today's election as the Taliban carried out attacks throughout the country, including an attempted raid on a bank less than 2km from the presidential palace in Kabul.

Masked commandos stormed the bank and eventually dragged three bloodied corpses down a staircase and dumped them on the side of the road before taking them away in a pickup truck. Security forces sealed off roads leading into the area and the sound of gunshots filled the air during the hours-long standoff, witnesses said.

Hayatullah, who runs a nearby tea shop, told the Agence France-Presse that he saw armed men climbing the back stairs of the building. "I asked them what they were doing," he said. "One of them put his forefinger to his lips and said, 'We're suicide bombers'. I left and told the bank guards."

A series of other attacks yesterday came after days of escalating violence as the Taliban followed through on threats to try to disrupt today's vote.

Roadside bombs reportedly killed a district chief and a tribal leader in Kandahar, two police officers in Uruzgan, and four civilians in Paktika.

All of those provinces are in southern Afghanistan, which has born the brunt of the insurgency. But attacks have also spread to northern provinces, which are considered more secure.



An Afghan national army soldier stands guard on the streets of Kabul ahead of the elections. [Paula Bronstein / Getty](#)



In Faryab, attacks on police and election officials in Gormach district prevented lorries from bringing election materials to polling stations, according to the Independent Elections Commission's district field co-ordinator, who asked that his name not be used. He said rockets hit a police station in Gormach, killing three officers and injuring at least three civilians and the police chief.

Also, a lorry carrying election materials there hit a landmine and was fired upon by militants, according to the driver, Ahmad, who like many Afghans uses only one name. He escaped without serious injuries, but the lorry was destroyed, he said.

Taliban fighters yesterday struck a police station in Emamsaheb district of Kunduz, a northern province that was once held up as a post-conflict success story but has fallen under the influence of the Taliban over the past year.

The Taliban's "deputy governor" of the province, Mullah Ahmad, said in a phone interview that his fighters had killed four police officers in the dawn attack.

But the head of the district, Fufi Manon, denied any deaths. He said one officer was injured and the police station was burnt down. Mr Ahmad said the Taliban began blocking roads yesterday in Kunduz in preparation for the election. He said the Taliban planned to attack polling stations in Kunduz today.

There have been incidents of violence and intimidation in neighbouring Balkh province in the run-up to the election, including the July 6 killing of an election official.

A candidate for the provincial council, Murtaza Zewari, said he received a phone call on Tuesday from a person claiming to be a member of the Taliban warning him to drop out of the race. "You're a young person starting your life. You shouldn't be involved with the government because the foreigners are involved with the government," the apparent Taliban member said, according to Mr Zewari.

Taliban militants have also appeared for the first time in Balkh's Shulgarah district and threatened voters.

On August 10, just after 10pm, villagers in Bodana Qala attending a funeral saw about 35 Taliban fighters walking towards them.

“When they came into the valley people started running from there to hide in their houses,” said Abdul Satar, who attended the funeral.

The Taliban, who were armed with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and automatic weapons, had come to warn residents not to participate in today’s elections. They returned for three consecutive nights with the same message.

“They were inside the village for about half an hour telling people: ‘If we see anyone with colour on their fingers, we will cut them off,’” said Mr Satar. The militants were referring to the indelible ink used at polling stations to mark the fingers of voters.

But the villagers remained determined to cast their ballots today despite the threats.

“After they were gone some people said: ‘Even if they cut my throat I will vote’,” said Mr Satar.

Abdul Basir, the Independent Elections Commission’s district field co-ordinator for Shulgarah, said villagers reported the Taliban threats. He added that someone had placed landmines near Bodana Qala.

But he said the IEC is “not worried about the vote” in the district. “The situation is under control because of soldiers and police,” he said.

The district police chief met villagers and promised to send officers to stand guard at night. Police and Afghan National Army soldiers also began patrolling the fields and forests around the village, which has kept the Taliban away, Mr Satar and Mr Basir said.

Before the interviews, a fighter jet screamed across the sky, a further sign of the Nato-led international military presence in the area.

Mr Satar said villagers were hopeful that Afghan and Nato military operations would keep the Taliban out of their district and keep them safe from the insurgency that has spread throughout much of the country.

But they have been nervous since Taliban fighters visited them.

He said most people in the village were likely to vote for Hamid Karzai, the incumbent president, in today’s poll despite their misgivings about his government.

“When Karzai became president, the people of Bodana Qala didn’t think these things would happen,” said Mr Satar, referring to Taliban activity in the area. “Now they are all afraid.”

Last night, President Karzai urged Afghanistan’s millions of voters to flock to polling stations and vote for a better future. “I hope that tomorrow our countrymen, millions of them, will come to vote for the country’s stability, for the country’s peace, for the country’s progress,” he told reporters in Kabul on the eve of polling. “I’m requesting everybody to come out and vote. It’s good for all of us,” said Mr Karzai, on the sidelines of a wreath-laying ceremony to commemorate the formal end of Britain’s bid to conquer Afghanistan in 1919. “I’m requesting all our people, wherever they are – in villages, in homes, in remote areas, in valleys – to come out and vote in millions to make this country a greater, better success,” he added.

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\* With additional reporting by Agence France-Presse

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