

(1) Afghanistan Sets...

The current parliament's five-year term was to expire in June 2015, but Ghani extended it by decree amid security fears and disagreements on how to prevent fraud.

The main challenges ahead of the vote are registering Afghans, many of whom do not have identification documents, and setting up ballot stations in remote areas. Plans for voter security and preventing fraud are also critical.

Afghanistan has held two parliamentary elections since the end of Taliban rule, in 2005 and 2010. District council elections have never been held.

The 2014 presidential election produced no agreed winner and led to a U.S.-brokered deal that saw former rivals Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah forced into an uneasy coalition that has struggled to win popular support. (Reuters)

(2) US Diplomat in...

to eliminating terrorist groups on its soil."

Wells previously visited Pakistan in January, accompanied by officials from the US National Security Council and Ambassador David Hale.

On that occasion, Wells had underlined the centrality of Pakistan's support to the success of America's strategy in Afghanistan. (Pajhwok)

(3) Defense Ministry...

resources to secure the elections," the MoD deputy spokesman Mohammad Radmanish told TOLO news on Thursday. "Our plans will be implemented in the near future." Figures By Ministry of Interior

Last week, deputy minister of interior for security, Gen. Murad Ali Murad, briefed the IEC officials over their recent findings on security of polling stations and said that more than 1,100 polling stations across the country are faced with high security threats.

Another 948 polling stations are not under the control of government forces, he said.

Majority of the polling stations are located in Helmand, Badakhshan, Baghlan, Faryab, Sar-e-Pul, Takhar, Ghazni, Paktia and Zabul provinces, the ministry said.

The Afghan government has outlined a three-phase election security plan. The first plan will be applied on the identification of those polling stations which are facing serious threats and military operations will be launched there; the second plan will be focusing on areas with higher security threats and more troops will be deployed there while in the third plan, the Afghan National Army will be providing support to the Afghan National Police (ANP) in the transferring process of election materials.

"At least 40 percent of the polling stations require efforts to decrease the level of threats in order to hold elections there," Mohammad Naeem Ayoubzada, head of Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan, told TOLOnews.

"They are not conducting parliamentary and district councils' elections, because soon the issue of Loya Jirga and amendment of the Constitution will be raised," former vice president Ahmad Zia Massoud said at a gathering on Thursday.

The Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah's Office meanwhile said government has finalized security plan for the elections.

"Holding the elections is one of the top priorities of the Afghan government. We have finalized our security and financial plans," said Jawed Faisal, deputy spokesman for Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. (Tolo news)

(4) Regional, Global...

present at the gathering slammed the government for not paying attention to their problems. (Pajhwok)

(5) Helmand Hunger...

hunger strike protest are those who have lost members of their families in war and violence in the province. They said the Helmand residents are tired of war and that they ask government and the Taliban to announce a ceasefire, and end war and violence.

One member of the protest, Khodaidad, said he has lost four members of his family in last Friday suicide attack in Lashkargah City.

He said seven other members of his family were wounded in the attack. "I have no expectation from government and the Taliban; they both are working for foreigners. But people will stand as the Turkey people uprising. You saw what happened there. If we stay united, nothing will be able to resist against us," said Khodaidad.

Another protester, Mohammad Arif, said four of his relatives were killed and five others were injured in last Friday suicide attack.

"There is no one in Afghanistan to say he does not want peace. Only the anti-government insurgents want war. No one else wants the people to be killed and wounded," said Arif.

Helmand peace rally members said they would not break the hunger strike unless the Taliban responds positively to their demand for a ceasefire in the province. (Tolo news)

(6) As Afghan Forces...

to Iran to find a living."

The problem underlines broader challenges facing the Kabul government and its U.S. allies, which last year announced a strategy to force the Taliban to the negotiating table through a mix of air strikes and stepped-up assistance to Afghan forces.

This month, Afghan forces, backed by U.S. air power and close assistance from U.S. advisers, began a fresh operation dubbed Maiwand 12, to hit the Taliban in the insurgency hotspots of Marjah and Nad Ali districts of Helmand province.

As operations have increased in Helmand, Western officials acknowledge that the pressure has pushed militants to Farah.

'LOWERING OF AMBITION'

But they say the insurgent focus on areas far from former battlegrounds where they had threatened the government show the problems they are facing.

"Taliban offensives in these remote areas represent a significant lowering of ambition after their failure to take any provincial capitals in 2017," U.S. Navy Captain Tom Gresback, spokesman for the NATO-led Resolute Support coalition, said in an emailed statement.

U.S. aircraft recently began bombing "drug factories" in opium-rich Helmand, but local leaders and officials in Kabul say the Taliban will fight hard to avoid losing control of smuggling routes, which bring in millions of dollars for the insurgency.

"There are hundreds of fighters who move back and forth between Farah and Helmand," the Afghan security official said.

"There is a route for smuggling opium and heroin from Helmand to Farah and finally Iran and the Taliban and the smugglers will always fight to protect. It is tens of millions of dollars."

The U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Robert Bass, told the BBC this month that Iran was providing logistical support to the Taliban, an accusation rejected by Tehran.

Iran has always denied interfering in Afghanistan but Afghan officials say it has multiple interests as well as its general hostility to the United States.

They say it fears dams in Farah could slow the flow of water into Iran and has suspicions about a planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline.

"There is only one reason behind this: Iran's interference which provides the insurgents weapons and tries to hamper the TAPI project," said provincial council member Dadullah Qaneh. (Reuters)

(7) Pakistan: 'Dossier'...

several other terrorist groups, including Jamaat-ulAhrar, or JuD, maintaining "hideouts" on the other side of the largely porous border between the two countries.

Seeking action

He said Kabul has been asked to take action against the terrorist hideouts being used for "financing, planning and undertaking cross-border terrorist attacks" on

Pakistani military posts, cities and towns.

"We have shared the locations of the safe heavens of these groups with Afghan and the U.S. authorities on many occasions, however, our concerns have not yet been fully addressed. This issue has been addressed in some locations where Afghanistan has established its border posts and deployed troops," Faisal told reporters at his weekly news conference Thursday.

There was no immediate reaction available from the Afghan government to Pakistani assertions.

A Pakistan military spokesman, Major-General Asif Ghafoor, revealed a day earlier that security forces recently have arrested 16 would-be suicide bombers, including nine Afghans. Ghafoor said all the bombers had come from Afghanistan to carry out terrorist activities.

A U.S. drone strike earlier this month in an Afghan border region killed at least 21 fighters and commanders of the Pakistani Taliban, a move Islamabad welcomed.

Afghan authorities, for their part, have been accusing Pakistan's military institutions of supporting and harboring sanctuaries of the Taliban and its allied Haqqani network that is waging deadly attacks on Afghan and U.S.-led international forces in the country.

Bilateral talks

The allegations and counter allegations come as Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi is scheduled to visit Kabul next week at the invitation of President Ashraf Ghani for bilateral talks on reducing tensions, and improving trade and economic ties.

The Trump administration has been pressing Islamabad to take decisive action against alleged Afghan Taliban sanctuaries on its soil and also recently suspended military assistance to Pakistan until it delivers on counterterrorism pledges.

Officials in Islamabad reject the charges, saying no insurgent hideouts exist on their side of the border. Tensions in bilateral ties have deteriorated in recent months. Both sides insist, however, a diplomatic re-engagement has been underway to address mutual concerns.

The State Department's Wells is in Pakistan where she has held talks with senior officials on developments in Afghanistan. Spokesman Faisal said Ambassador Wells held a meeting Thursday with Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua.

The discussions are focused on issues including Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts and the regional situation in Afghanistan in the wake of U.S. President Donald Trump's South Asia policy, Faisal said.

"The two countries are maintaining regular engagement to address the common challenges and take the relationship forward," the spokesman said. (VoA)

(8) Uzbekistan Ready...

countries interest in assisting with the project.

"We have started primary talks with Iran because the railroad will connect to Iran. They have shown an interest. Serious discussions are ongoing with Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank which is in China and meanwhile, China itself is interested to invest in the railway (project)," he said.

The Afghanistan Railway Authority states the project will provide job opportunities for at least 30,000 people and Afghanistan would earn about \$40 million USD annually from such a link.

"Any part of the railway project which will be implemented is a benefit for Afghanistan. But we should remember that a similar railway project was considered by Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The two countries had talks about it and we should be careful about this," said Nazir Ahmad Najabi, lecturer at Kabul Polytechnic University.

The railway will be 657 kilometers long and will take two years to build.

The procurement details of the project will be completed by the end of this year and the contracting company will be selected in the near future, the authority said. (Tolo news)

(9) US Remains in...

political resolution. We are going to have to get other players involved with this, other regional players that have acuity there. There got to be a better way. You cannot live constant state of war," Neller added. Meanwhile, officials from the Pentagon said new US forces have arrived in Afghanistan and that they have stationed in 36 battalions.

According to the US Department of Defense, the total number of the new forces reach to 1,000 who have rich advisory experience in Afghanistan and Iraq and volunteered to serve in Afghanistan and provide advice to Afghan forces in war against the Taliban.

Neller made remarks on regional countries role in Afghanistan's peace at a time that Uzbekistan last week hosted a meeting on Afghanistan's peace in which it announced its readiness to host direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. (Tolo news)

(10) US Orders 8...

The press release issued on March 28 says the \$47,037,076 USD firm-fixed-price delivery order "provides for the procurement of eight Scan Eagle unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), spares, support equipment, one logistician field service representative (FSR); 16 FSR operators to provide Scan Eagle UAS technical services; two site surveys and site activation teams; and program management to sustain and operate the ScanEagle UAS in support of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan under a Building Partnership Capacity case".

Work is expected to be completed in March 2019, the Defense Post report said.

Last July, Insitu was awarded a \$19,611,424 USD contract for five ScanEagle systems and a similar support package for the Afghan Security Forces, the report said.

The system has been used by the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces since April 2016. Scan Eagle is a small, portable low-altitude long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicle used for battlefield intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance since August 2004 in the Iraq War.

With a flight endurance of over 20 hours, the drone carries a stabilized electro-optical and/or infrared camera on a lightweight inertial stabilized turret system. It can also carry a miniature synthetic aperture radar.

The Defense Post report says the aircraft is launched from the "Super Wedge" pneumatic launcher and recovered using the "Skyhook" retrieval system, which uses a hook on the wingtip to catch a rope hanging from a pole.

A single Scan Eagle system reportedly comprises four air vehicles, a ground control station, a remote video terminal and the launch and recovery systems, the report said. (Tolo news)

(11) President Directs...

discussed pine nuts' processing, packaging, marketing and exports. Economic and commerce sector officials and governors of southeastern Khost and Paktia provinces were present at the meeting, the statement said.

President Ghani said regional countries were ready to import pine nuts from Afghanistan and the opportunity if used would help the country's revenue.

He directed agriculture officials and his advisor on agriculture affairs Abdul Hameed Helmandi to take special steps for processing, packaging and marketing of pine nuts produced in Paktia, Paktika and Khost provinces.

Ghani also asked the governors to work in cooperation with provincial agriculture officials for better management of pine nut products. He said illegal trafficking of pine nuts mostly benefited smugglers and pine nut exports should be better managed and legalized so people receive more benefits. He said he would follow the issue for development through Abdul Hameed Helmandi during the ongoing solar year. (Pajhwok)

(12) New Study...

many of which were derived from

recent satellite imagery of 50cm spatial resolution or finer. A range of statistical methods were tested and implemented for integrating these data and to produce estimates of total population at different administrative unit levels and 100 x 100m resolution across the country, together with age/sex breakdowns and associated confidence intervals".

The survey undertaken found the estimated population of Afghanistan using the approaches outlined is 34,442,108.

The report stated the estimated total is higher than current CSO estimates for 2016/17 of 27,657,145 but show a much closer alignment to data and current UN and US Census Bureau estimates.

The report also stated it is estimated that 15.6 percent of the population is under five years old and 42.5 percent is over 20 years.

The research has estimated Kabul population to be over 4.1 million which is 500,000 less than figures by Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization (SCO).

In other areas, differences can be seen such as the SCO has estimated Helmand population to be more than 900,000 while the organization has estimated the population as two million. This comes after insecurity and conflict have displaced thousands of Helmand residents in recent years.

The research estimates Baghlan population as more than 1.1 million while the figures of SCO shows it at least 900,000.

"Population counting from space by the help of a foreign country cannot be very accurate even if it has a political dimension," said Robaba Parwani, an MP.

According to the research, the population in Khost, Paktia, Paktika, Laghman and Kunar provinces is more than the SCO findings. However, the population of Bamiyan and Zabul have been estimated higher than that of the SCO.

"This research is not accurate because Afghanistan's security situation will not allow us to find an exact number of people in the country," said Azim Qoyash, a senator. According to the draft, the last national population census in Afghanistan was conducted in 1979, and this covered only 67 percent of the districts in the country due to security reasons.

Recent plans to conduct a full population census have also been hampered by ongoing insecurity.

Current national and subnational population estimates are based largely on projected population counts using a 2.03 percent growth rate from a 1979 baseline population, updated with information from pre-census household listing activities, where these are available.

Current estimates using these approaches put Afghanistan's population at 27.7 million. However, analyses shows that under scenarios of growth rates differing by 1 percent, as recent data suggest is possible, then the national population could be as low as 19.1 million or as high as 40 million.

Such uncertainties have prompted the initiation of a rolling census and the development of geospatial modelling efforts.

Starting in 2011, the Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization (CSO) has been conducting a form of rolling census, the Socio-Demographic and Economic Survey (SDES), one or more provinces at a time, which includes a full household enumeration and detailed data collection for 50 percent of households.

Currently, SDES has been completed for 12 provinces (Kabul, Kapisa, Daikundi, Bamiyan, Samangan, Ghor, Takhar, Balkh, Parwan, Nimroz and Herat, with partial SDES coverage of Khost). Within provinces for which SDES has been completed, some areas were not surveyed due to insecurity.

Due to a pressing need for spatially disaggregated, recent population estimates for the whole country, high-resolution population mapping, has been conducted by WorldPop-Flowminder, in collaboration with the CSO, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). (Tolo news)