

(1) Afghans Vote...

authorities provided little information about reported blasts and ongoing armed clashes with the Taliban in various provinces.

A security official who requested anonymity told AFP that two civilians had been killed and 27 wounded in Taliban bombings and mortar attacks at polling centres across the country.

Serious security incidents were reported in several provinces including Kunduz, Nangarhar, Kabul, Bamiyan and Kandahar.

The Taliban, who unleashed a string of bombings during the two-month election campaign, claimed to have conducted hundreds of attacks against Afghanistan's "fake elections".

Ghani, having voted at a Kabul high school, said the most important issue was finding a leader with a mandate to bring peace to the war-torn nation.

"Our roadmap (for peace) is ready, I want the people to give us permission and legitimacy so that we pursue peace," said Ghani, who is seeking a second term.

Some 9.6 million Afghans are registered to vote, but many lack faith that after 18 years of war any leader can unify the fractious country and improve basic living conditions, boost the stagnating economy or bolster security.

Observers from the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission said turnout appeared to be low, especially among women.

Still, many voters braved insurgent attacks and long queues to cast a ballot. "I know there are security threats but bombs and attacks have become part of our everyday lives," 55-year-old Mohiuddin, who only gave one name, told AFP.

"I am not afraid, we have to vote if we want to bring changes."

Abdullah and Ghani both claimed victory in the 2014 election -- a vote so tainted by fraud and violence that it led to a constitutional crisis and forced then-US president Barack Obama to push for a compromise that saw Abdullah awarded the subordinate role.

"The only request I have from the election commission is that they ensure the transparency of the election because lots of people have lost their trust," said Afghan voter Sunawbar Mirzae, 23.

- Problems voting -

Voting in Afghanistan's fourth presidential election was supposed to take place at some 5,000 polling centres across the country but hundreds were closed due to the security situation.

Many Afghans said voting went smoothly, triumphantly holding up fingers stained in indelible ink to show they had cast a ballot, but several said they had experienced problems.

"I came this early morning to cast my ballot. Unfortunately my name was not on the list," said Ziyarat Khan, a farmer in Nangarhar. "The whole process is messy like the last time."

Campaigning was hampered by violence from the first day, when Ghani's running mate was targeted in a bomb-and-gun attack that left at least 20 dead. Bloody attacks have continued to rock Afghanistan, including a Taliban bombing at a Ghani rally last week that killed at least 26 people in the central province of Parwan near Kabul.

The interior ministry said it had deployed 72,000 forces to help secure polling stations.

Election officials say this will be the cleanest election yet, with equipment such as biometric fingerprint readers and better training for poll workers to ensure the vote is fair.

Still, the US embassy in Kabul has said it is "disturbed by so many complaints about security, lack of an equal playing field and fraud".

Saturday's poll was initially slated to take place in April, but was twice delayed because election workers were ill-prepared, and the US was leading a push to forge a withdrawal agreement with the Taliban.

That deal has been scuppered for now after US President Donald Trump pulled out, and Afghanistan's next president will likely face the daunting task of trying to strike a bargain with the Taliban.

Results are not expected until October 19. Candidates need more than 50 percent of the vote to be declared the

outright winner, or else the top two will head for a second round in November. (AFP)

(2) 98pc of Polling ...

workers present at polling sites.

A statement from TEFA said they obtained this information from 5,200 trained observers who started their work at 6:30am in all 34 provinces of the country.

Based on TEFA observers, representatives of candidates and political parties as well as election oversight institutes were present at 93 percent of polling sites, it added.

TEFA findings show 96.8 percent of polling sites had the required sensitive and non-sensitive materials and biometric devices were present at 98.9 percent of the sites.

TEFA observers started their duty at 6:30am across the country but they could not monitor two percent of the polling sites in the beginning in Faryab, Herat, Kunar and Ghor provinces as they were not allowed to do so.

TEFA said the absence of workers, security threats and the late arrival of sensitive and other materials at the sites were the main reasons for the opening of some of the stations behind schedule. The absence of voter names from the lists stored in biometric devices was a huge challenge, the statement said.

According to reports, the problem was encountered at 88 percent of polling sites across the country, with many voters returning home without casting their ballots.

The source said there was also a difference between the number of people gathered at a site and the number of voters registered there.

Citing an example, TEFA said, 2,500 voters stood in queues at a polling centre, where only 380 people had been registered as voters in the Shahrak-i-Muhajerin area of Ghazni City.

TEFA said the turnout of women voters in Khost, Paktia, Jawzjan, Ghazni, Nimroz, Paktika, Badakhshan, Kabul, Takhar, Farah, Kandahar and Sar-i-Pul provinces was very low.

Women at some polling stations did not allow election workers to take their photos, particularly in the Dara Zindan area of Samangan province.

TEFA noted telecom services were disrupted in 12 provinces of the country, creating hurdles to communication among Independent Election Commission (IEC) offices. (Pajhwok)

(3) New Measures ...

since the 2014 elections and the 2018 parliamentary polls.

The new measures would significantly reduce the potential for fraud, the ambassador said while visiting a polling centre in Kabul. The UK has provided 8 million pounds to support the election. "We have no interest in spending our money to support a fraudulent process. We want to see a credible and transparent process." The deputy ambassador remarked.

Lever denounced as despicable Taliban's threat to attack polling sites and derail the election. "If the Taliban want to have a place in a future Afghanistan, they need to respect the democratic process; civilians, voting stations, election workers..." (Pajhwok)

(4) Biometric ...

He said machines could still take up to 10 minutes to identify a voter, although he said problems of identification were often the result of registration problems, while some women were deterred by the machines' facial recognition software.

In conservative areas of Afghanistan, most adult women and older girls cover their faces outside the home.

The machines, made by Germany's Dermalog Identification Systems, use fingerprint scans and photos to identify voters before they cast their ballots to reduce fraud that has been widespread in Afghan votes since the 2001 fall of the Taliban.

"The process is too lengthy," Shaharazad Akbar, head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, said on Twitter about the biometric identification process.

Hawa Alam Nuristani, head of the IEC, said any issues with the machines would be addressed in future.

Dermalog could not be reached for

comment outside normal German office hours. (Agencies)

(5) Pakistan Keeps ...

will continue to support its Afghan brothers. Therefore, it has been decided to open major border terminals to facilitate [the] movement of Afghan citizens across the border." (Pajhwok)

(6) China Aims...

strengthen exchanges and cooperation with all parties and work together to build a standardized and reasonable arms trade order and make positive contributions to maintaining international and regional peace and stability." Since the two countries embarked on a trade war, China has frequently rebuked the United States for its withdrawal from international treaties and not playing by the rules, seeking to portray China as a staunch defender of multilateralism.

China was the fifth-largest global arms exporter between 2014 and 2018, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, though China itself does not publish figures for how many arms it exports.

During that period China delivered major arms to 53 countries, with Pakistan the main recipient followed by Bangladesh, according to the think-tank.

After years of steep increases in military spending and cash injections into domestic contractors, experts say some Chinese-made equipment is now comparable to Russian or Western counterparts, though accurate information about the performance of Chinese weapons is scarce.

China faces bans on Western military imports, dating back to anger over its crushing of pro-democracy protests in and around Tiananmen Square in 1989. That makes its domestic arms industry crucial in assembling a modern military that can enforce claims over self-ruled Taiwan and disputed maritime territories. (Reuters)

(7) Western Dominance...

lasting solutions to global challenges should be founded "on the basis of the UN Charter, through the balance of interests of all states," the Russian FM recommended.

The top Russian diplomat also expressed hope that Moscow and Washington would agree on an extension of the New Strategic Arms Treaty (New START), which is set to expire in February 2021. All the suggestions that Russia has made to establish additional communication channels to work on the issue are still "on the table," Lavrov said, as is Moscow's most recent proposal for NATO to impose a mutual moratorium on the deployment of short- and mid-range missiles in Europe.

The moratorium proposal is aimed at maintaining the status quo after the US' August withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), considered a key pillar of European security architecture. (RT)

(8) House Democrats...

announced the subpoena after the Trump administration missed a Thursday deadline to provide documents and information about contacts with Ukrainian officials, as well as a July 25 telephone call between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

That call is central to the impeachment investigation that Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the Democratic-led House, announced this week.

The impeachment inquiry has cast a new pall over Trump's presidency just months after he emerged from the shadow cast by Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into whether he colluded with Russia in the 2016 election.

Trump has reacted furiously to the impeachment inquiry, arguing he did nothing wrong, and accusing Democrats of launching a politically motivated "witch hunt."

More than 300 former national security officials from both Republican and Democratic administrations on Friday endorsed the impeachment inquiry, saying they did not prejudge the outcome but wanted to know more facts.

As the subpoena was announced, Trump's re-election campaign said it would spend \$10 million next week airing an ad called "Biden corruption"

on television and websites that accuses Democrats of playing politics with the impeachment investigation.

Former Democratic Vice President Joe Biden is Trump's leading rival in the race for the 2020 presidential election.

The White House this week released a summary of Trump's July 25 phone call in which he asked Zelenskyy to investigate Biden and his son Hunter Biden ahead of the November 2020 presidential election - a call at the heart of the whistleblower's complaint. (Reuters)

(9) Venezuela Has...

Guaido as an 'interim president' in January, the US has seized about \$7 billion in assets belonging to Venezuela's state oil giant PDVSA and its US subsidiary Citgo, with the US court recently recognizing a shadowy board of Citgo directors 'appointed' by Guaido.

The sanctions crackdown has cost the Venezuelan economy a staggering \$130 billion dollars since 2015, Rodriguez said, accusing the US of "a shameless robbery of all our resources" that resulted in a nine-fold drop in the country's income.

The Venezuela's case shows that "the international legal order has disappeared," eroded by the years of the US-championed regime change policies around the world, with Venezuela becoming the best embodiment of the US efforts to date, the VP said.

"Venezuela has become the best evil experiment against multilateralism"

The rounds of punitive sanctions have taken a heavy toll on Venezuela's already crisis-hit economy, sparking a mass migration to the neighboring countries amid food shortage and occasional blackouts. However, the US keeps tightening the screws, while playing a 'lifesaver' with aid dollars and funding the regime change campaign. On Tuesday, Washington allocated \$52 million, reportedly diverted from humanitarian aid for Central American countries, "in development assistance" to Guaido, to help him "restore...democratic governance" in Venezuela. (RT)

(10) Hurricane Dorian...

storm made landfall on the Bahamas on Sept. 1 as a Category 5 hurricane and stalled over the island nation for about 24 hours. Dorian reduced much of Grand Abaco and Grand Bahama islands to rubble.

Minnis described Hurricane Dorian as a "generational tragedy."

Earlier this week the prime minister announced the creation of the Ministry of Disaster Preparedness, Management and Reconstruction to oversee recovery efforts in the Bahamas. He designated Abaco, eastern Grand Bahama and other impacted areas as special economic recovery zones, providing tax incentives for three years.

Shelters in New Providence were housing more than 1,600 people displaced by the storm. Minnis said the government plans to provide transitional housing to enable residents to return to the islands. (UPI)

(11) Poland's Ruling...

by 2024. In 2016, it was 84.6 billion zlotys, according to Poland's statistics office.

The party also pledged to build a new oncology center, offer a package of medical check-ups for every Pole, improve care for senior citizens and create a fund for modernizing hospitals.

In common with eastern European neighbors, private healthcare is booming in Poland, as low public spending has led to increased waiting times and staff shortages that have pushed many to seek faster treatment privately.

In Poland, state healthcare spending reaching only about 4.6% of GDP in 2016 well below the 6.6% average among OECD countries.

The healthcare pledges follow hot on the heels of promises earlier this month to almost double the minimum wage for workers and offer pensioners regular annual cash bonuses.

Earlier in the year, the party announced increased spending on child benefits and transport infrastructure as well as a package of tax cuts.

While some observers have warned of the dangers of major increases in public spending ahead of an economic slowdown, PiS has been keen to present itself as fiscally responsible, vowing to

cut debt and proposing the country's first balanced budget in three decades.

Economists have pointed out that the plan for a balanced budget in 2020 is dependent on a number of one-off factors and may be revised after the elections.

PiS is well ahead in the opinion polls, consistently scoring over 40% while the main liberal opposition grouping, Civic Coalition, usually scores below 30%. (Reuters)

(12) Moment of Truth...

parliament over the "Irish backstop" - an insurance policy to prevent the return of a hard border between the British province of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

After a meeting with EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier in Brussels, Ireland's Coveney said negotiations had to be on the basis of a "serious proposal" from the British on how they would replace the backstop.

"That hasn't happened yet and until there is a serious proposal in writing ... then the gaps that are wide at the moment will remain. And time is running out," he told reporters.

Barnier said the bloc was firmly united on insisting on a legally operative fix for the Irish border issue, saying it needed to avoid a hard border and protect the integrity of the EU's single market.

"The onus is on the British prime minister and his team," Coveney said, adding that Ireland was open to extending the Brexit departure date. "An extension is preferable to no deal," he said.

Britain is due to present concrete legal texts on their Brexit plans next week after the Conservative Party conference.

This month, British lawmakers forced through a law which compels Johnson to seek an extension to Brexit unless he has agreed a new deal with the EU by Oct. 19 or got parliament's approval to leave without an agreement, an outcome a majority of lawmakers and many businesses believe would be calamitous. (Reuters)

(13) 'System Is Not ...

"The U.S. aviation system each day transports millions of people safely, so it's not like we have to completely overhaul the entire system, it's not broken. But these incidents have shown us that there are ways to improve the existing system," Hart said, referring to fatal crashes of a Lion Air 737 MAX in Indonesia and an Ethiopian Airlines 737 MAX five months apart that killed a total of 346 people.

The MAX remains grounded and Boeing has not set when it will conduct a key certification test flight. Some in Congress and in aviation have criticized the FAA's longstanding practice of delegating certification tasks to manufacturers.

Michael Perrone, who heads the Professional Aviation Safety Specialists union, said at a House hearing in July that external entities designated by the FAA "are now performing more than 90 percent of FAA's certification activities despite serious concerns that oversight is lacking."

Hart, former chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and a licensed pilot, heads the Joint Authorities Technical Review, a panel including air-safety regulators from the United States, Canada, China, Indonesia, European Union and Brazil.

Reuters reported on Sept. 17 the review's recommendations will include citing regulations that need to be harmonized internationally and where communications can be improved at the FAA and among international regulators, citing a person briefed on the matter.

Hart on Friday said the panel would release its recommendations to the FAA "shortly," but declined to provide more details on the timeline. He said the panel's goal was not for all of its members to agree, but to provide a wide range of opinions and recommendations to the FAA.

Hart spoke to students the Vaughn College of Aeronautics and Technology in Queens. Asked by a student whether passengers can be expected to fly again on a 737 MAX, Hart said he predicted people would "sooner or later forget" about the crashes and investigations. (Reuters)