

Afghanistan struggles with democracy

By Duncan Campbell

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JALALABAD: Dozens of Afghan police recruits in battledress are marching in drill outside their headquarters in Jalalabad in Nangarhar province near the border with Pakistan, some in step, others laughing and joking, very obviously not.

Afghanistan is due to have national elections in the face of violent opposition from the Taliban and the aim is to have as many police officers and soldiers on the ground, particularly in the border areas, to ensure that voting takes place.

Violence has increased significantly in the past 10 days. In Jalalabad the province's security chief, Haji Ajab Shah, was killed in an explosion in his office last week. Inside the fortified building Mohammed Younis Noorzai, the police chief, says he is confident his officers can police the elections.

"God willing, we will have a good election process," he says. The Taliban were making incursions "but they are not very active, they are like a thief, they come in and then they go back (over the border) immediately".

In his nearby palace the governor, former mujahideen commander Haji Din Muhammad, turbaned, urbane and white-bearded, says the registration of voters is going well despite the

violence. "There have been 400,000 people registered here and there is a still a month left to register," he says. "As for the exact time of the election, whether it will take place or not, it depends on the general situation of the registration process in the whole country."

Back in Kabul the extravagantly dressed Molodine is adamant he is the best candidate. "Look at me," he says, "I am a beautiful man. I am an appropriate candidate to become the president of Afghanistan ... Hey, I know how to make everyone vote for me. If I become president, poppy cultivation is free."

His promises are greeted with laughter by his audience and although there has been some heckling, the mood among the 70 or 80 people gathered in the open air is friendly.

Molodine will not win. He is not even running. He is a character portrayed by the actor Nassar Ahmed in a play called Good Choice, which is being premiered in the capital before being toured in 16 different productions and in both the Afghan languages of Dari and Pushto with the aim of encouraging people to vote.

Each troupe will perform the show 30 times and eventually reach, they

hope, an audience of about 500,000 people, including those in the rural areas who have no access to television.

For all the jokes in the play, this is a serious business. Although President Hamid Karzai and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (Unama) are adamant the elections will go ahead, each fresh outbreak of violence raises further doubts.

More than 700 people have been killed in fighting in the past nine months, endangering registration.

The elections are the key issue in Afghanistan, a litmus test of how secure and self-confident the country is. Unama, which is responsible for the process, is bullishly optimistic. Its spokesman, Manoel Almeida e Silva, described the public's participation so far as "extremely encouraging".

In Kabul registration is running at 87 per cent but in many of the provinces it barely exists: 0.6 per cent in Panjshir in the north east. In Nuristan, also in the north east, and Paktika, in the south east, registration sites are only now being set up. When five Medecins sans Frontieres workers were killed in Badghis province last week the registration sites there

closed although they have since reopened.

"It is going to get worse before it gets better," is a phrase on the lips of many in the international community, who say the security and investment that should have gone to Afghanistan has been diverted to Iraq.

There is also concern among aid workers about the way they are perceived in some areas as being linked with the coalition forces. A leaflet distributed in the more volatile areas shows Afghans with rocket launchers and semi-automatic rifles and carries the warning: "If you attack coalition forces, aid will stop." Such linkage — which is not true — is of enormous concern to aid workers.

There are 20,000 coalition troops in the country in addition to the 6,400-strong International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), the UN-authorized multinational force whose troops come from Nato and other countries and are concentrated in Kabul.

Tanks and armoured cars patrol the countryside. There are private armed guards everywhere, from the entrances to cafes to the front seats of the countless four-wheel drive vehi-

cles with their radio masts and aid agency acronym logos that whiz through the streets of the capital.

But while Kabul may be relatively secure, other parts of the country are not.

In the south east the Taliban carry out their incursions. In other rural areas the warlords and their militias flex their muscles, making their demands of Mr Karzai. The disarmament programme, which is tied to the election process, has been spasmodic.

"There is a lot of pressure, to be sure, on everybody with the election coming up and we are focused very much on that but we also need to focus beyond the election," says Commander Chris Henderson, the Isaf spokesman.

But despite the violence, Afghans continue to return to the country.

Before 2001, according to Unama, Afghans were the world's biggest refugee diaspora with more than 6 million displaced people. Now they have the largest number of returning refugees: 3.6 million since the end of 2001. The majority are from Pakistan and Iran, those who left for Europe, the US and Australia being less likely to make the journey back. Many of

the wealthiest exiles in the Gulf states are biding their time until they see whether the elections take place and bring with them the promised stability.

Ahmad Nabi Faqiri, a baseball-capped 30-year-old engineer who escaped on foot with his family to Pakistan in 1982 and later settled in Delaware, says he has now returned to live and work.

He is an admirer of Mr Karzai and hopeful for the future. "You know the saying 'give a man a fish and feed him for a day, teach him how to fish and he is fed for a lifetime', that is the pillar that a society like Afghanistan needs to be built on," he says.

Many feel that Afghanistan is too reliant on international aid. While some of the programmes are working, the security issue clouds the work outside Kabul, making much of the country a no-go area. "I don't know how long I can stay here," one German aid worker says. "I don't want to be a martyr."

Part of the country is booming: rents for a house in Kabul can be up to pounds sterling 43,000 a year and property prices shoot up by the day. New business investments are proudly announced at press conferences.

But the security situation is fluid. One day a highway seems safe, the next only to be attempted with armed escort. Even Kabul, with its razor-wired buildings, frequent power failures and armoured patrols, hardly looks like a capital preparing to exercise its democratic imperative.

Mr Karzai, with an 85 per cent approval rating, is most likely to win if the election takes place. But some of his opponents accuse him of making pre-election deals with warlords — a charge he denies. There is a concern that many of the corrupt, old power brokers, whose hands are stained with blood and whose pockets are stuffed with drug money, might return to positions of power.

The country which has been at the crossroads of east and west is now at its own crossroads. One direction points to a poor but slowly emerging society that will enjoy some stability for the first time in 25 years. The other points down the path of Iraq: rolling violent opposition to anyone seen as a proxy of the west.

Just like the chuckling recruits in Jalalabad, some people are in step with the election process, others very obviously are not.—*Dawn/The Guardian News Service.*