

Chronology of Events in Afghanistan, December 2003*

December 1

Afghans begin registering for first elections. (Reuters)

The United Nations has begun registering the first of an estimated 10.5 million Afghans expected to vote in their country's first free elections in 2004. The registration process began in the city of Kandahar on November 30 and was extended to seven other cities, including Kabul on December 1, said Catarina Fabiansson, spokeswoman for the U.N. election office in Afghanistan. All Afghans aged over 18 by June 20, 2004, are qualified to register to elect a national president in the elections, which are due to be held in June 2004. There will be separate registration sites for men and women. Fabiansson said most of those to register initially will be the 19,000 district representatives who have the job of electing a Loya Jirga, or Grand Assembly, due to meet from December 10 to approve a new constitution. Ordinary people would have the chance to register in the towns of Bamiyan and Herat, and general registration would be extended to other cities in December. Fabiansson said the project would be extended to the provinces, then to villages and was expected to be completed by early 2004.

Former regional Taliban official arrested in Jalalabad. (Associated Press / AP)

A man who served as a regional police commander in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime was arrested for alleged involvement in attacks against Afghan forces, an official said. Maulvi Sahib-ul Haq was arrested in Jalalabad, the capital of the province of Nangarhar, by Afghan security forces, said Ziauddin, an Afghan intelligence official. "He is accused of involvement in activities against the government," Ziauddin said. He declined to provide details. Haq was the head of the Taliban religious police for eastern parts of Afghanistan, which included Nangarhar province.

Over 1,000 refugees reportedly need urgent assistance in Herat Province. (Afghan news agency Bakhtar)

Over 1,000 returnees are facing problems in three refugee camps in Herat Province. An official of the Department of Refugee of Herat Province said that over 1,000 families, who had travelled outside Afghanistan from the provinces of Badghis and Herat because of years of war and drought, have been housed on their return in the camps in Dasht-e Shidayi, Maslakh and Minar Hai-e in Herat Province.

Over 1,000 refugees have complained about shortages of food, fuel and the lack of access to healthcare services. They used to receiving food and fuel by the World Food

* *Disclaimer: Reports contained in this document are selected from publicly available resources and edited by country experts. The information provided here is not, and does not purport to be, either exhaustive with regard to conditions in the country of origin surveyed, or conclusive as to the merits of any particular claim. Further information may be obtained from BO Ankara*

Programme in the past. However, this assistance has been stopped from the beginning of 2003.

December 2

Two prominent Afghan women from Kabul win seats in Loya Jerga. (Afghan newspaper *Hewad*)

In the process of electing women delegates to the Constitution Loya Jerga, Soraya Parluka and Jamila Mojahed achieved being elected as women delegates from the capital Kabul. Soraya is the director of Women's Council while Jamila Mojahed is a presenter at the *Afghanistan Television* and editor-in-chief of *Malalay Magazine*. These elections were held in Ghazi Stadium of Kabul Province.

Two Afghan commanders hand over weapons to government. (Dow Jones International News)

Afghanistan's two main northern militia commanders handed over dozens of tanks and heavy guns, putting aside their personal hostility and placing a measure of trust in the government of President Hamid Karzai. The action by Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammed, whose armies have been attacking each other for two years, is a small triumph for the fledgling government's attempts to gain control over the provinces. At Gondi Volga, a former Soviet military base about 19 miles east of the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, government officials inspected the arsenal collected from Mohammed's fighters. The weaponry was surrendered to the new Afghan National Army under a deal between the militia commanders brokered with the help of British peacekeepers. Gen. Ishaq Noori, leading a delegation from the Ministry of Defense in Kabul, said a similar compound west of Mazar was filled with heavy artillery and ammunition from Dostum. Gen. Abdul Sabur, a spokesman for Mohammed's side, claimed at the weapons hand-over that Dostum had surrendered only a few of his tanks. The British peacekeepers conceded that most weapons impounded were from Mohammed's faction, but said the next phase would take in more of Dostum's guns. Under a separate U.N.-sponsored disarmament program, hundreds of soldiers have also handed in guns, rockets and tanks in Kunduz and Gardez.

Afghan tribal leaders vow to cooperate in maintaining security. (Afghan news agency Bakhtar)

Deputy Head of State Hedayat Amin Arsala met the representatives of the people of a number of free tribes. At the meeting, the tribes' representatives said they would support the "Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan" and emphasized that they would not withdraw from any cooperation in ensuring security of Afghanistan's borders. The representatives said that free tribes had made a tribal decision. Based on this decision, they would burn the houses of those who shelter opposition militants in their houses and these people would be fined 300,000 afghanis. Border Affairs Minister Mohammad Aref Nurzai spoke about the historic role of free tribes in establishing security, safeguarding Afghanistan's border and about duties of the tribes. Deputy Head of State Hedayat Amin Arsala said: "As the border and tribes people are determined to prevent destructive and terrorist activities, they should also make efforts to strengthen friendly relations between the people living in the border areas to reinforce peace and security in the region."

Afghan officials linked to Loya Jerga session beaten. (Afghan news agency Hindokosh)

Two members of the commission in charge of elections to the Loya Jerga have been beaten. An official of the Constitution Loya Jerga, said that the armed men of Prosecutor Bashir, the present prosecutor of Kapisa Province, beat two of the staff of the office who had gone to the province to conduct a survey among the nomads. He said that they threatened them with death and the police had difficulties rescuing them.

Mosque attacked in Kandahar city. (Afghan news agency Hindokosh)

Unknown men threw a bomb at a mosque at night. Mola Sayd Ahmad Qaderi, preacher of the Ghaws Saqolain mosque, which was attacked, said that he worked for the government and the Taliban therefore attacked the mosque to kill him.

December 3

Jowzjan Province elects 10 representatives to Loya Jerga. (Afghan Jowzjan Province television)

The election of the representatives of the people of Jowzjan Province to the Constitutional Loya Jerga took place in Balkh University hall in line with the schedule of the Constitution Commission branch based in Mazar-i Sharif. The election process was monitored by the members of the Mazar-i Sharif-based branch of the Constitutional Commission, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [UNAMA] and the Afghan independent Human Rights Committee. There were 520 voters who cast their votes in the ballot box. At the beginning, there were 18 candidates, three of them resigned and 15 candidates were left. The following have been elected as Loya Jerga delegates: General Abdorrashid Dostum, Mohammad Omar Makhdom, Dr Azam Dadfar, Abdol Hai Yashin, Esmail Munshi, Dr Jamaer, Mohammad Akbar Bai, Saleh Mohammad Ustad Asef, Haji Allah Berdi and Engineer Ahmad.

Key humanitarian route reopens. (UN OCHA Integrated Regional Information Network / IRIN)

The Salang tunnel, on a key humanitarian route in Afghanistan which was closed in July 2003, has been partially reopened, coinciding with the blocking of the high passes by snow and ice. According to the Kabul-Salang highway department, the tunnel is now operational for traffic from 1800 to 0600, with 70 percent of the reconstruction work having been completed.

December 4

Médecins Sans Frontières suspends activities in Zhare Dasht camp. (Médecins Sans Frontières)

Under the current circumstances of increased violence against aid workers in Afghanistan, the neutrality of humanitarian action is seriously challenged and the risk for MSF staff working outside of Kandahar has reached unacceptable levels. In the wake of recent attacks on aid workers, the medical humanitarian organisation Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) has decided to suspend its activities in Zhare Dasht

camp near Kandahar. MSF has been providing basic health care at Zhare Dasht, home to 40,000 displaced people, and sees an average of 7,500 patients each month. For the most vulnerable of the Zhare Dasht population, a chest infection can represent a life-threatening condition. In addition to the absence of consultative services, with MSF's withdrawal the population has lost access to maternal and new-born health care and vital immunisation services for children and pregnant women. MSF was also running a feeding programme for malnourished children. MSF continues the programme in Kandahar town and in other parts of the country.

Afghan on UN-sponsored project killed in ambush in Farah province. (Reuters)

At least one Afghan working in a U.N.-sponsored programme was killed and 11 wounded in an ambush by suspected members of the ousted Taliban in western Afghanistan. The ambush happened in the Chakaw region of Farah province where about 60 Afghans working for the Central Statistics Department were heading from neighbouring Nimroz province after completing a U.N.-sponsored census project there. Manoel Almeida e Silva, the U.N. spokesman in Kabul, said the team was made up of Afghan government employees working on the U.N.-sponsored project.

Afghan government convoy attacked in Farah, one killed. (Japanese news agency Kyodo News)

An Afghan government employee was killed and five others injured when a motorcade of Afghan government employees was attacked allegedly by Taliban rebels at Dasht-e-Bakwa in Farah Province. The Afghan who died in the attack was an employee of the fire brigade department while the five injured employees were hospitalized in Kandahar.

Missile hits religious school in Khost province. (AP)

Insurgents fired on a coalition convoy and a rocket slammed into a religious school in Khost province, but no casualties were reported. The strike on the school occurred in the evening in the village of Matun in Khost province. The rocket hit the main hall of the madrassa, or Islamic school, "but all the mullahs (teachers) were sleeping and nobody was hurt," district chief Mohammed Akbar Zadran said. Two more rockets landed in nearby fields a few minutes later, he said. Another bomb damaged a bridge in the Mando Zayi district of Khost, Zadran said. Police were investigating but had made no arrests so far, he said.

In the Orgun district of Paktika, a bomb exploded outside the compound of the district administration, said Noor Mohammad, head of the provincial customs authority. The wall of the compound was damaged but no one was injured, he said.

December 5

Taliban says assembly delegates deserve death. (Reuters)

Taliban guerrillas have threatened to step up attacks ahead of a traditional grand assembly in December 2003 to approve a new constitution, and said those attending it deserved to be killed. Taliban commander Hafiz Abdul Majeed, a member of a 10-member Taliban leadership council set up in 2003, said that the constitutional Loya Jirga (grand assembly) would be a "drama" staged by US occupiers. "Those who participate in the loya jirga are people deserving death," he said. U.S.-backed President Hamid Karzai warned in November 2003 that the Taliban was expected to

accelerate attacks ahead of the loya jirga, which had been scheduled to start in Kabul on December 10.

Two Turkish workers and Afghan kidnapped outside Kabul. (AP)

Two Turkish engineers and an Afghan were kidnapped outside Kabul, an official said. Men burst into the office of a Turkish construction company southeast of the capital, beat and tied up an Afghan staff member, then abducted two Turkish workers and another Afghan, said Nick Downie of the Afghanistan NGO Security Office. The three hostages appeared to be taken to another province, and no contact has been made with them or their abductors, Downie said.

AP report on the same news on December 8: A security company said that two Turkish engineers and an Afghan who were kidnapped on December 5 have been freed, but Afghan officials and Turkish diplomats could not confirm that. "It would appear that this was a domestic incident deriving from a local dispute and did not involve any of the usual extremist elements," Nick Downie, the head of the security office, said in a statement.

December 6

Afghan TV replaces key Northern Alliance figure. (Reuters)

Afghanistan has replaced the head of national television, effectively taking control of the station from the hands of the government's dominant Northern Alliance faction, which banned shows featuring women singing or dancing. Engineer Mohammad Ishaq, a key Northern Alliance member, was replaced by Ghulam Hassan Hazrati, who previously worked for the the national radio station. Ishaq had been given a position as one of three deputies of the Information and Culture Minister. Hazrati is seen as an ally of Information and Culture Minister Sayed Raheen Makhdoom.

Bomb wounds 18 in Kandahar city. (Reuters)

A bomb wounded at least 18 people in the main market of the southern Afghan city of Kandahar and President Hamid Karzai called it a "terrorist" attempt to disrupt a key constitutional assembly. A spokesman for the hardline Islamic Taliban which used to rule Afghanistan denied responsibility, saying: "Taliban do no attack civilian targets." A police officer at the scene said the bomb may have been rigged to a bicycle, while local intelligence chief General Mohammad Salim said it had been hidden inside a pressure cooker. Victims, all male Afghan shopkeepers or bystanders, were seen bleeding on the street in Kandahar's main market which was crowded with people at the time. A later controlled explosion by U.S. troops caused some renewed panic in the city.

Three Indian road workers kidnapped in Zabul province. (Agence France Presse / AFP)

Three Indian road workers were kidnapped on the highway between the Afghan capital and the main southern city of Kandahar. Unknown armed men reportedly stopped the Indians' car at 4:00 pm around 10 kilometres north of Shahjoy in Zabul province. Their Afghan driver was beaten and the armed men made off with the Indians and their car. The Indians were working for the Indian BSC/C and C joint venture firm which is helping to rebuild the important Kabul-Kandahar road. Workers on the road have been attacked several times by suspected Taliban. The road is seen

as a key project by the Afghan government in its drive to try to improve security and communications in the troubled south.

Associated Press report on the same news on December 24: Two Indian engineers released nearly three weeks after they were abducted in central Afghanistan while working on a key road project said that they were not mistreated and appeared in good health. Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali said the men were released at night and that no ransom payment was made. "The people who kidnapped them had no relations with the leadership of the Taliban who claimed that they were responsible," Jalali said. "They were local people." The governor of Ghazni province, Asadullah Khan, who helped negotiate the release, said the kidnappers were former Taliban members Ahmadullah Aakhandzada and Abdul Hakim.

Nine Afghan children among 10 killed in US attack in Ghazni. (AFP)

Nine children were among 10 people killed in a US air attack on a suspected "terrorist" in southeast Afghanistan, the US military said. "Following the attack, coalition ground forces searching the area found the bodies of both the intended target and those of nine children nearby," the US military said in a statement from the coalition's Bagram Air Base headquarters north of Kabul. The coalition said a commission is being set up to investigate the deaths and said its forces "follow stringent rules of engagement to specifically avoid this type of incident while continuing to target terrorists" in Afghanistan.

US raid kills six children in Paktia province. (AFP)

Six children were killed during a US air raid in eastern Afghanistan, a US military spokesman said on December 10, confirming the second US attack within 24 hours in which children died. US soldiers discovered the bodies after aircraft and ground troops launched an attack at night against a compound east of Gardez town, Paktia province, where Taliban militant Mullah Jilani was believed to be holding out.

December 7

Pacha Khan Zadran arrested by Pakistani forces. (Dow Jones International News)

A renegade Afghan commander has been arrested in a tribal area of Pakistan near the Afghan border, an official said. Pacha Khan Zadran, whose forces have sporadically fought the U.S.-backed Afghan government, was taken into custody about December 1 by Pakistani paramilitary troops guarding the border in an area where local tribesmen often support pro-Taliban militants in neighboring Afghanistan. Zadran was taken into custody along with three other unidentified Afghans at Dirdoni, a border checkpoint 180 kilometers southwest of Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier Province, said a local administrative official. He wouldn't comment on why Zadran was arrested, whether he had been charged, why there was a delay in announcing his capture and whether Pakistan was discussing the case with Afghanistan.

Demonstrators in Konduz province say not represented in Loya Jerga. (Iranian radio *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*)

A number of refugees and different tribes from the camps in Konduz Province and its suburbs staged a demonstration, calling for their representatives to be included in the

constitutional Loya Jerga in Afghanistan. More than 500 internally displaced people (IDPs) from the Gojur ethnic and other tribes, who are living in camps in Konduz and its suburbs, staged a mass demonstration in the Konduz streets and gathered in front of the UNAMA office, calling for their representatives to be included in the constitutional Loya Jerga, for their repatriation to their original areas, and for their rights and privileges to be given to them as IDPs. The constitutional Loya Jerga's elections which ended in the northeastern provinces with the elections in Baghlan Province were the last in which 11 representatives were elected from among 475 candidates. They said that they had been receiving assistance before, but there had been no one to assist them for one year now. They said that they wanted to return to their own areas, but agencies working in this area had not helped them. It comes at a time when Gojurs in the Farkhar District of Takhar Province organized protests against not having their representatives in the constitutional Loya Jerga and for reclaiming their properties in the Farkhar area of Takhar Province.

Nineteen people elected to Loya Jerga from Herat Province. (Afghan Herat TV)

Nineteen representatives from Herat Province to the Constitutional Loya Jerga were elected. The following 19 persons were elected: Ahmad Shah Sharukhi, from Golran District; Sayed Shafiq Sadat from Enjil District; Abdol Shakor from Pashtun Zarghun District; Abdol Hadi from Koshk District; Mohammad Rafiq Shahir from city ward No 5, Herat City; Dr Saleh Mohammad Saljuqi, from Ghowrian; Dawlat from Zerkoh area of Shindand District; Abdol Rauf Mokhles [Herat University Rector]; Abdol Zaher Alizada from Kohsan District; Mohammad Ebrahim Koshki; Sayed Mohammad Hosayn Hosayni [head of Herat Labour and Social Affairs Department]; Abdol Qani Mawlawizada form Zendajan District; Gholam Faruq Majruh; Ghazi Nazir Ahmad from Gozara District; Mohammad Sayed from Pashtun Zarghun District; Abdollah Mawlawizada from Obe District; Mohammad Aqa Rohani; Sayed Abdol Rahman from Farsi District; and Mohammad Daud from Adraskan District.

December 8

Unidentified assailants kill Afghan engineer in southern Ghazni Province. (Afghan Islamic Press news agency / AIP)

The Ghazni Province governor says that an Afghan engineer has been killed when a vehicle belonging to Bahar, an Afghan organization, was attacked in Gelan District. Ghazni Governor Haji Asadollah Khaled said that unidentified persons attacked a vehicle, killing Salim Shah, an Afghan engineer. The Ghazni governor added: "The assailants were five persons and all of them have been captured. They have confessed to their crime and the incident is under investigation."

Associated Press report on the same news on December 10: Afghan police at a checkpoint mistakenly shot and killed the Pakistani engineer who died on a highway in eastern Afghanistan. Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali said five police officers were now in custody and an investigation was underway. He gave no further details other than the five were not Taliban. The Pakistani engineer, Anwar Shah, 38, was traveling with four colleagues on the Kabul-Kandahar highway near Muqur in Ghazni province when their vehicle was raked by gunfire. The Afghan driver was wounded, and two other Pakistanis and an Afghan were unhurt, officials said.

Southwestern Afghan provinces elect representatives to assembly. (Afghan news agency Hindokosh)

Elections of representatives to the Constitutional Loya Jega were held in the provinces of Nimroz, Urozgan, Helmand and Kandahar. Five people were selected out of 14 candidates in Zabol Province. Some 154 out of 373 voters were present in the election process in the province. In Nimroz Province, three candidates were selected out of eight candidates and 146 voters were present out of 192 voters. In Urozgan Province, six candidates were selected out of 11 candidates and some 582 voters out of 748 were present during the voting process. In Helmand Province, 12 people were selected out of 22 candidates and some 548 voters cast their votes for them.

In Kandahar Province, 17 candidates were selected out of 22 candidates. Among the selected representatives are Ahmad Wali Karzai; Azizollah Wasefi; Khalid Pashtun, spokesman for Kandahar governor, and Haji Hayatollah Tarzi. Women's election was also held in the above mentioned provinces. Two women from the each provinces were selected as representatives to the Constitutional Loya Jega.

Two Afghan women with military connection killed. (Afghan newspaper *Erada*)

Two women were killed in a house in Wazir Akbar Khan colony in Kabul city. The two women were wives of an Afghan pilot. It is not yet clear why they were killed. Head of the Police Station No 10 Gen Faiq Samimi says the police have launched investigation into the incident. He said six guards of two neighbouring NGOs had been arrested in connection with the investigation.

December 9

Mujahedin candidates dominate Afghan loya jirga elections. (AFP)

Candidates from powerful conservative *mujahedin* ("holy warrior") factions dominate the delegates elected to Afghanistan's Loya Jirga assembly to debate the new draft constitution. The final elections for the 500 delegates were completed. Some 344 were elected in "general" elections by some 19,000 provincial representatives with women choosing another 64 female representatives, two for each province. Another 42 delegates were chosen to represent refugees in Iran, Pakistan, displaced people, nomads and Sikh and Hindu minorities. President Hamid Karzai has also appointed 50 delegates, including 25 women, to the Loya Jirga.

According to the preliminary results, members of *mujahedin* factions, who fought the 1979-89 Soviet invaders and then each other in the 1992-96 civil war, and their supporters account for nearly 70 percent of the 344 delegates chosen in the "general" elections. In Kabul province, ultra-conservative Abdul Rab Rasul Sayaf and the Islamist Hezbi Islami movement secured 10 of the 14 posts. Four notorious commanders and a former Taliban deputy planning minister are among the delegates elected in Wardak province southwest of Kabul. In eastern Nangarhar province, 10 of the 22 delegates are affiliated with Hezbi Islami while in the northeast 50 percent were elected from the ranks of the ethnic Tajik Jamiat faction which dominates the government. Former *mujahedin* president Burhanuddin Rabbani was also elected. In northern Balkh province, candidates from the Uzbek Junbish faction won 50 percent of the posts, rival Jamiat candidates took 20 percent with the rest taken by independents. In western Herat 98 percent of the delegates are close to powerful Tajik

governor Ismail Khan. Monarchists and candidates close to *mujahedin* leader Pir Ghilani won most seats in the former southern Taliban stronghold of Kandahar and the southeast. Members of Karzai's government are allowed to attend the Loya Jirga debates but in theory are not allowed to take part in the discussions. Provincial governors and top officials from the government, police and armed forces are not allowed to take part. Three candidates had their elections invalidated. One was a police chief, one a military commander and the third was a drug trafficker. Of the 344 generally elected delegates, around 120 are considered neutral and are not allied to any armed faction.

December 10

Afghan women protest in Pakistan, saying present Kabul regime outdoes Taliban in abusing women. (AFP)

More than 100 Afghan women staged a protest in the Pakistani capital accusing Afghanistan's post-Taliban regime of surpassing their predecessors in violating human and women's rights. "After the Taliban's demolition, their fascist brothers were installed into power for the second time and these religious fascist *jihadis* act in a more bloody and heinous way than their Taliban brethren," a statement issued by the Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women (RAWA) said. The statement was distributed by RAWA protesters outside United Nations offices in Islamabad to mark World Human Rights day. The organisation, which campaigned clandestinely at great risk against the Taliban and their brutal treatment of women, said "violence continues against women" under the current regime. RAWA alleged there were unaccountable incidents of rape, forced marriages and incidents of self-immolation and suicides by women under the present transitional government, which is dominated by leaders of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. RAWA accused northern commanders Abdul Rashid Dostam, an Uzbek commander, his Tajik rival Atta Mohammad, and western strongman Ismail Khan, now governor of Herat province as figures of gross crimes against women.

Afghan Defense Minister turns in weapons. (AP)

Mohammed Fahim, who as a militia commander fought to oust the Taliban and al-Qaida, kept his personal militia even after he became Defense Minister in the government of President Hamid Karzai. Fahim has now ordered at least part of his forces handed over to the central government. A column of transporters laden with his forces' heavy weapons inched along a road out of the Panjshir Valley, bound for a compound of the new Afghan National Army near Kabul. General Bismillah Khan, Fahim's loyal chief of staff, supervised the process. The column was carrying 64 heavy weapons including 11 tanks, 10 rocket-launchers and two scud missiles, Khan said. He said 100 tanks and troop carriers were handed over earlier to the U.S.-trained national army, and that more will follow once they are repaired. Still, it remains unclear just how many weapons are hidden in the gorge-like valley, which the Taliban never managed to conquer.

December 11

U.N. refugee agency says no prospect of return to dangerous border zone. (AP)

The United Nations' refugee agency said there was no immediate prospect of it restoring operations in Afghanistan's troubled southern and eastern provinces after a string of attacks on aid workers. UNHCR withdrew about 30 international staff and closed centers in four border provinces for refugees returning from Pakistan after the November assassination of a French staffer in Ghazni city, south of Kabul. The withdrawal was billed as temporary, and spokesman Maki Shinohara said a security review was still ongoing. But she said the agency could only resume full operations if it can reach remote areas. "This is not foreseen in the near future unless measures are taken concretely to improve security at the border region," she said.

No government control in 80 percent of Zabul province. (AFP)

Authorities have lost control of 80 percent of one of Afghanistan's most troubled southeast border provinces Zabul, the deputy governor said. "Though the area is not under Taliban authority, the local administration failed to apply its rule in 80 percent of the province," deputy governor Maulvi Muhammad Omar said. He said that only three districts - Shahjoy, Shahra-e-Safa and the capital Qalat - were under government control. The rebels have taken control of several tiny border districts, according to a United Nations report in October 2003. Omar said police had abandoned checkpoints on dangerous strips of the highway.

U.S. troops clash with Afghan commander's bodyguards in Jalalabad. (Reuters)

U.S. soldiers exchanged fire with bodyguards of a pro-government commander they were trying to arrest at a maternity hospital in the city of Jalalabad, police said. Jalalabad police chief Haji Ajab Shah said there had been casualties among the bodyguards, but it was unclear if any U.S. soldiers were wounded. He said the clash happened when the U.S. soldiers arrived at the hospital in an attempt to arrest Commander Esmatullah, who commands pro-government forces in the neighbouring province of Laghman.

UN envoy warns security problems threaten Afghan elections. (AFP)

Insecurity and powerful factions could threaten Afghanistan's first democratic elections in 2004, United Nations special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi warned in a new report. "We have warned the UN Security Council that credible elections will depend upon the creation of a legislative, political and security environment in which voters can participate in the elections in a free, fair and fully informed manner," he said in the document. Security problems prevented access to "significant portions of the south" which would "also make parliamentary elections well nigh impossible, because the inaccessible areas are predominantly Pashtun and this would result in their disenfranchisement and under-representation in the parliament".

Analysts have warned that Afghanistan's political process could end in failure unless it addressed the problem of the perceived alienation of ethnic Pashtuns, who make up around 40 percent of the population and are concentrated in the troubled south and east.

Brahimi warned that a new constitution, on its own, would not solve the country's numerous problems. "Insecurity would still be a looming menace, and the narrow popular base of the government a source of popular dissatisfaction amongst large

sections of the Afghan population." Brahimi said Afghanistan urgently needed to make the government more representative of the country's ethnic and regional diversity, improve national unity, extend reconstruction and tackle security problems. "If unresolved, these gaps will have the effect of disrupting the environment necessary for the successful completion of the Bonn agenda," which laid down a framework for Afghanistan's transition to democracy by June 2004. "In particular the constitutional and electoral exercises will be unlikely to produce a stable, legitimate political order. Rather, they could merely institutionalise what is inherently a fractured, unstable political order dominated by factional interests and local insecurity."

December 13

Armed attackers "seriously" injure pro-government cleric in Helmand Province. (Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran)

Unidentified armed people have attacked a cleric in Helmand Province. Unidentified armed people attacked an Afghan cleric, Mawlawi Amir Mohammad, as he was performing evening prayers in the Kajaki District of Helmand Province, seriously injuring him. The Afghan government condemned the attack and blamed it on members of the Taleban.

Tribal leader shot dead in in Nangarhar Province. (AIP)

Unidentified assailants killed Haji Mohammad Yunos, a leader of the Khogiani tribe in Nangarhar Province. A leader of the Wazir clan of the Khogiani tribe, Haji Mohammad Yunos, was shot by unidentified men in his native area of "Wazir". Commenting on those behind this killing, a relative said: "We are not at odds with anyone, but Haji Mohammad Yunos had taken active part against the Taleban and Al-Qa'idah. It is possible that Al-Qa'idah might have carried out this attack." Haji Mohammad Yunos served as the top commander of the National Salvation Front led by Prof Sebghatollah Mojadedi in Nangarhar during the *jihād* against the USSR.

December 14

Afghan Loya Jirga convened to debate new constitution. (British Broadcasting Corporation / BBC)

Convening the meeting, former king Zahir Shah said it was delegates' duty to work for the wishes of the people. Some 500 delegates are attending the meeting, set to last several weeks. They include former communists, *mujahideen* fighters, tribal leaders and Western-based exiles. "The people are relying on you and you should not forget them," the 88-year-old former monarch said as he formally opened the Loya Jirga, along with the country's interim President Hamid Karzai. President Karzai laid down a challenge to militants - the Taleban and their allies have threatened to target the assembly. Moderate *mujahideen* leader and a former prime minister, Sebghatullah Mujadidi, was later elected chairman. Delegates are discussing a 160-article draft document. The legal system will also be debated, though the draft stops short of endorsing Islamic Sharia law. Many decisions may be left to the conservative Islamic clerics who hold sway over the courts. More than 170,000 people took part in public consultation meetings around the country and 50,000 written surveys were submitted.

Xinhua News Agency report on the same news on December 15: A former president and moderate Jihadi leader has been elected to head the Afghan constitutional assembly, which is to debate and approve the country's nation-building document. Mujadadi, who leads the moderate party of the Afghan National Liberation Front, is among important Jihadi figures.

AP report on the same news on December 15: The opening celebrations over, Afghanistan's constitutional council hit its first controversy, with women delegates denouncing their colleagues for trying to shut them out of leadership positions. After much wrangling, one woman was granted a deputy chairman's position, but some still expressed anger over second-class treatment. "From the very beginning, the process was flawed because we are totally outnumbered here by the men," said Palwasha Hassan, a delegate from Kabul. Mujaddedi later broke with protocol and selected a woman -- Safia Sediqi, a lawyer from eastern Nangarhar province -- to a created fourth deputy position. He named two other women as deputy's assistants. "In this tent, we are 100 women against 400 men. But we represent more than 50 percent of Afghan society," said Nadira, a female delegate from Kabul.

Institute for War and Peace Reporting report on the same news on December 18: Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali said at a news conference that security force sweeps in the hills and plains around the capital had led to the discovery and defusion of 67 BM 12 and Scud missiles since the start of the Loya Jirga. He said police were trying to catch those responsible. Jalali also said night letters - a traditional form of protest in Afghanistan where posters are distributed under cover of darkness - had been distributed calling for a *Jihad* or Holy War against President Hamed Karzai's transitional administration and American troops stationed in the country. Many hundreds of Afghan National Army, national police and international forces have been deployed in the immediate area of the Loya Jirga and police in and around Kabul have set up checkpoints to ring the city.

Institute for War and Peace Reporting report on the same news on December 19: About 25 jihadi delegates boycotted Loya Jirga committee work on December 18 and 19, and another 75 sat in silence during the sessions, in a protest over procedures for deciding the type of government and ethnic composition of the gathering's leadership. The current draft of the constitution creates a strong presidential system, but the *jihadis* favour a parliamentary one. Hafiz Mansoor, the leader of the boycott and editor of *Payam-e-Mujahed*, a *jihadi* newspaper, has been outspoken in his criticism of President Karzai. Mansoor was an unsuccessful candidate for chair of the Loya Jirga. The group also protested that there are too many Pashtuns in the Loya Jirga leadership. Most of the boycotters belong to the Jamiat-e-Islami party, which is dominated by Tajiks.

Faroq Wardak, head of the secretariat of Constitutional Commission, said that the work of the committees is going normally. He said it doesn't matter if two or three people don't agree with the system. Mirwais Yaseni, one of the four deputy chairs for the Loya Jirga, disagreed with Hakimi's statement about the choice of leaders by ethnicity. He pointed out that Burhanuddin Rabbani, Asef Muhsini, Dr Mushahed and other committee chairs are not Pashtuns, and that of 20 committee secretaries there are only two are members of this group. However, three of the four deputy chairs of the Loya Jirga are Pashtun.

Bomb damages building of women's group in Jalalabad. (AP)

A bomb exploded outside the office of a women's organization in eastern Afghanistan, officials said. There were no injuries, but the blast damaged a wall and shattered windows of the Afghan Women's Peace Committee office in Jalalabad, said the police. Gen. Sayed Aga Saqib, the commander of an Afghan army brigade in the city, said security officials discovered the bomb and were able to clear the area before it exploded.

December 15

UN body facing difficulties in handling refugees in Pakistan. (Pakistan Press International Information Services / PPIIS)

UNHCR has offered choice to Afghan refugees housed in Shalman Camp either to repatriate or relocate to another camp due to difficulty in catering humanitarian services. UNHCR representative said " the agency has told Afghan refugees in the remote Shalman Camp that they would be offered the choice next March [2004] to repatriate to Afghanistan or relocate to an existing refugee camp in Pakistan". He said that the decision to move the 10,000 refugees from Shalman, one of the camps established to shelter Afghans who fled the 2001 war in their homeland, reflected the inhospitable location in a waterless valley near the Khyber Pass and the difficulty in providing humanitarian services. He said the refugees, who have been consulted over recent months about the plan to consolidate the population into other camps, were given the choice either to return to Afghanistan under the assisted voluntary repatriation programme or they could move in transportation provided by UNHCR to one of three locations elsewhere in Pakistan's Tribal Areas. "Shalman Camp, which has two separate locations in the barren valley, was designed to hold up to 26,000 refugees but now has just 1,656 families composed of 10,347 people," he added. He said the alternative locations on offer includes Kotkai in Bajaur Agency, which consists of two adjacent camps now holding about 13,500 people. Barkali Camp, also in Bajaur Agency, has a similar number of residents and can also chose to go to Asgharo Camp in Kurram Agency, which now has 10,000 residents. "These new camps are well supplied with water and, with the return of some refugees over the past two years, also have space available to absorb the refugees who choose to move there from Shalman," he observed. All the camps offered to refugees as alternatives were established at the same time as Shalman, when some 300,000 Afghans fled the fighting in their homeland. In July 2003, the UN Refugee Agency relocated about 20,000 refugees from a makeshift camp on the Pakistani border in Balochistan at Chaman. Nearly 60 percent of those refugees chose to move to Afghanistan and 40 percent relocated to a refugee camp deeper in Pakistan. There are still about 200,000 of the refugees from 2001 living in Pakistan, while the rest were among more than 1.9 million Afghan refugees who have returned to Afghanistan since March 2002 under the UNHCR voluntary repatriation programme. More than 342,000 Afghan refugees returned this year from Pakistan to Afghanistan. Pakistan still has about 1.1 million Afghan refugees in camps, some dating back nearly a quarter century. A substantial, but unknown number of Afghans live in urban areas of Pakistan but not all are refugees. The voluntary repatriation programme, which handles minimal numbers of refugees at this time of year because of the Afghan winter, has been suspended since

the murder of a UNHCR employee in Afghanistan in November 2003. The programme will resume when UNHCR is satisfied that staff will be safe.

Two Afghans arrested in Pakistan on spying charge. (PPIS)

The political administration in South Waziristan has arrested two Afghans in the Zeri Noor refugee camp and seized from their possession a satellite phone a wireless set and other equipment believed to be used for spying They identified as Rahim and Akbar who were held when the law enforcement agencies raided two houses in the refugee camp. The accused spies were shifted to the Wara scouts camp for interrogation.

December 16

Two rockets slam Kabul, Taliban claim responsibility. (AFP)

Two rockets exploded in Kabul city, one hitting a house near the airport causing damage but no casualties, a senior security official said, as the Taliban claimed responsibility. The rockets hit the city at around 02:00 a.m, hours before before delegates of an assembly were to resume debate on ratifying the country's new constitution, the city's security chief Baba Jan said. A spokesman for the ousted Taliban regime claimed responsibility for the attack. "We warn more attacks on Kabul city today and tonight," the spokesman identifying himself as Abdul Samad said.

Karzai reopens key Afghan highway. (AFP)

Afghan President Hamid Karzai Tuesday reopened a newly renovated key highway linking Kabul with Kandahar in the south. Rebuilding Afghanistan's neglected and war-ravaged road network is a priority of Karzai's government in an effort to improve security and communications. With around a third of Afghanistan's population living within 50 kilometres of the highway, completion of the road is expected to improve people's access to markets, schools and health care and improve links to south and central Asian trade routes. The road is part of the crescent-shaped Highway One linking Kabul to the main western city Herat via Kandahar. Work on the 566 kilometre Kandahar-Herat section is due to begin in spring 2004 and is slated for completion by 2006.

Bomb targets Afghan mine clearance workers near Jalalabad. (AFP)

An improvised time bomb destroyed a vehicle belonging to a demining organisation in eastern Afghanistan but there were no casualties, a UN spokesman said. The improvised explosive device was detonated under a vehicle belonging to the OMAR demining organisation parked in Surkhadiwal village just metres off the highway between the main eastern city Jalalabad and Torkham on the Pakistan border, Manoel de Almeida e Silva said.

December 17

Hundreds of Afghan students stage anti-constitution rally in Jalalabad. (AFP)

Hundreds of Afghan university students joined a protest rally against proposed university fees outlined in the country's draft constitution. Students gathered at Daronta in eastern Afghanistan, near the provincial capital Jalalabad, and blocked the main highway leading to the Afghan capital Kabul. Protesters from Nangarhar

University said clause 43 of the draft which says Afghan students will have to pay fees for higher education was totally "wrong and unjustified". They said the jirga should work to continue the current system of free education for Afghans across the country. The demonstrators also called for Pashtu to be declared the national language. Under the draft both Pashtu and Dari are proposed as the official languages, mirroring Afghanistan's 1964 constitution.

Suspected Taliban burn school, kill guard in Kandahar province. (AP)

Suspected insurgents set fire to a village primary school and killed a security guard in southern Afghanistan, police said. Police, investigating the attack that destroyed one classroom at a boys' school in Vadi Dhusht district of Kandahar province, blamed Taliban rebels. The attackers killed the school guard, Amanullah. No one has been arrested.

In rally in Badghis Province people declare their support to Afghan government. (Afghan Badghis provincial radio station *Radio Qala-e Naw*).

People in Badghis held a huge rally and declared their support for the "Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan" and to Badghis Governor Gol Mohammad Arefi. The rally was attended by tribal and spirituals leaders and a large number of the people. During the rally they declared that Badghis Governor Gol Mohammad Arefi should not to be discharged from the governor position.

Woman delegate to Loya Jirga threatened. (Amnesty International website)

During the plenary session of the Constitutional Loya Jirga, a female delegate [Malalai Joya] spoke out against what she described as the domination of the process by strong political figures whom she called "criminals". The Chairman prevented the woman from continuing to speak and some of the delegates began screaming abuse at her. Some present were heard to say that they would kill the woman while others intervened to protect her. One powerful factional leader and delegate to the Constitutional Loya Jirga, Abdul Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf, was allowed to speak at length and told the gathering that those who speak against the *mujahideen* were the real perpetrators of abuse. The Chairman called for security guards to intervene and asked the woman to leave, threatening her with expulsion. He later changed his mind and allowed her to remain in the meeting, but warned her that she should not speak this way in the future.

Xinhua News Agency report on the same news on December 18: Afghan security authorities would provide necessary security to a woman delegate, Afghanistan's Interior Minister said. "Even police are ready to provide security protection to the lady and her family if she desires so," Jalali said.

December 18

World Food Programme: Militant attacks hurt poorest Afghans. (AFP)

Attacks by militants are hurting Afghanistan's most vulnerable people by hampering food distribution to the poor, a spokesman for the UN World Food Programme (WFP) said. "Insecurity is the main constraint to WFP's large-scale recovery and reconstruction activities, and thus hampers Afghanistan's reconstruction process," Maarten Roest said. "The most insecure areas are generally also the most poverty-stricken and food insecure," he said. In southeast Afghanistan's troubled Ghazni and

Paktika provinces, 39 percent of planned food distributions could not be delivered in November 2003. WFP was unable to reach more than 103,000 people, or 52 percent of the targeted population, in eastern Afghanistan, especially in districts bordering Pakistan, Roest said.

Prisoners released from Kandahar jail. (*Radio Afghanistan*)

Some 32 criminal prisoners were released from the Sarpozai Jail in Kandahar Province. The 32 prisoners, 20 of whom were youths, eight elderly persons and four women were released during a session attended by deputy Kandahar governor, judicial officials, representatives of Independent Human Rights Commission and UNAMA in line with the previous decree of the head of the Transitional Administration, Hamed Karzai, on release of criminal prisoners.

Attempt on the building housing women delegates to Loya Jirga. (Institute for War and Peace Reporting / IWPR)

A man was detained after he tried to enter a building accommodated female Loya Jirga delegates. The incident happened the night that Malalai Joya, a female representative from Farah province, had dismissed some of the delegates and leaders of the Loya Jirga as criminals who destroyed the country and said they should be put on trial. The arrested man, who has not been named, woke the women early in the morning as he stood outside shouting for others to attack the residence. According to witnesses, a few moments later there was more shouting and abusive remarks were directed at the women. Kabul female delegate, Suraya Parluka, believes the men were pro-mujahedin delegates because they were shouting, "Allahu Akbar (God is great)." Nuria Wesal, another woman delegate, said the women informed Loya Jirga chair Sibghatullah Mujaddidi about the incident. Mujaddidi promised to find the perpetrators, but deputy chair Safia Siddiqi suggested that the matter should not be pursued. Siddiqi said that the issue should not be exaggerated "because in their upcoming work the women will be faced with fear and hopelessness, and they will lose courage". Joya's remarks have been celebrated by ordinary people and demonstrations have been staged to support her in western Afghanistan.

December 19

Five hurt in blast in the city of Jalalabad. (AIP)

An explosion wounded five people near the new customs office in Jalalabad, Nangarhar Province. The explosion took place in a local hotel opposite Jalalabad's new customs office along the Torkham-Jalalabad highway. The explosion wounded the hotel's three staff and two guests.

December 20

Explosion in Jalalabad city kills one man, injures another. (AP)

A bomb ripped through a square lined by restaurants and shops in eastern Afghanistan, killing one man and injuring another. No one claimed responsibility for the explosion that also shattered windows in nearby buildings in Talashi square in central Jalalabad, the capital of Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province.

December 24

Two commanders arrested in the province of Laghman. (*Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*)

The Afghan government has deployed 50 police in the eastern province of Laghman where two dissident army commanders have been detained by US forces. Asmatollah and Naqibollah, who are also brothers, were recently detained by US forces. The reason for their detention has not been announced. The reason was the threat of retaliatory attacks by their supporters.

December 25

UN workers escape injury in Kabul bomb blast. (UN News Service)

An explosion struck a building housing six United Nations workers in the Afghan capital of Kabul, but the UN Assistance Mission to the country (UNAMA) reported that no one was injured. According to UNAMA, the outer wall of the housing compound in Kabul was damaged by the bomb blast, while windows in the house and neighbouring buildings were shattered. Four of the six UN staff that live in the compound were at home at the time of the explosion.

December 26

District-Afghan troops arrest local trader. (PPIS)

Afghan troops arrested a local trader from a market along Pak-Afghan border and shifted him to unknown destination. It was reported that several armed men wearing Afghan troops uniform kidnapped a noted trader Syed Yaro Agha from a market along Pak-Afghan border last week and took him to unknown location.

December 28

Six killed in suicide bombing near Kabul airport. (AFP)

Six people were killed when a suspected suicide bomber detonated explosives strapped to his body after being arrested by intelligence agents near Kabul international airport, Afghan officials said. "Chairman Jalal along with four bodyguards were killed while trying to arrest a terrorist who had explosive devices with him," Kabul police chief Baba Jan said, referring to the chairman of the 21st Intelligence Directorate.

A Taliban spokesman claimed responsibility for an apparent suicide blast which killed six people near Kabul airport and warned that another 60 suicide bombers planning to attack foreigners had entered the capital. The spokesman for the former Islamist regime said the bombers would attack peacekeeping troops, coalition forces and people working for the United Nations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The attack was allegedly carried out by Abdullah from Chechnya.

Third journalist association formed in Herat Province. (Herat News Centre)

The Social-Cultural Foundation of Journalists' House was set up at Aina [a French NGO] office in Herat. The Journalists' House is established in addition to the Association of Journalists supported by the independent Council of Professionals and

government-run Journalists' Association. The board of directors consisted of Mohammad Dawud Munir, the chancellor of Herat Literature Faculty, Masud Hasanzadah, a reporter of VOA (*Voice of America*) Radio, Khaleda Khorsand, Roya Sadat, Nahid Baghi, Qorban Mansur Bakhtar, the head of Herat AINA Office and Reza Shir Mohammadi. Masud Hasanzada was named as the head of Journalists' House.

December 29

Afghan women demonstrated in Mazar-i-Sharif for equal rights. (AFP)

Around 200 women in Mazar-i-Sharif held a rare demonstration calling for equal rights and a presidential system of government. The women said they wanted equal rights to be enforced in actions rather than words. The women said the treatment of female delegate Malalai Joya at the Loya Jirga showed women's voices were not respected. Joya was placed under United Nations protection following threats against her during the session.

Over 80 prisoners released in Herat province. (Afghan Herat TV)

In line with an order by Hamed Karzai on 18 November, 88 male and female prisoners have been released from Herat jail.

Earthquake in Iran drives Afghan refugees home. (IRIN)

Reports from the Afghan/Iran border suggest thousands of Afghan refugees who lived in Bam, scene of a destructive earthquake on December 26 that killed an estimated 20,000 people, are heading home after having lost everything in the disaster. Aid agencies estimate around 5,000 Afghans were resident in the Iranian city of Bam and that 90 percent of them were affected by the quake. According to the district governor of Farah province in western Afghanistan, from where the majority of Afghans in Bam hail, 145 of those Afghans who perished in the tragedy had already been buried in Iran and 220 corpses had arrived back from Iran with family members and been buried in the Qalay Kah district, Farah Province. Hundreds more bodies had already been delivered to the Afghan border for onward transport to families in Afghanistan at official as well as unofficial crossing points.

Dozens of Afghan children freeze to death in Kandahar Province. (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty RFE/RL *Afghanistan Report*).

Snowfall and freezing temperatures in the Kandahar Province have claimed the lives of dozens of Afghan children. Many of the victims were reportedly living in makeshift housing around Spin Boldak, near the Afghan-Pakistani border, to which they fled to escape factional fighting in northern Afghanistan.

*UNHCR Ankara
Country of Origin Information Team
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