



Alice Mahon: Why I could stay and fight no longer

## 'Thousands of terrorists' target Afghan poll

By Nick Meo in Kabul

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Intelligence reports have suggested large numbers of foreign militants may be heading for Kabul from neighbouring Pakistan, giving rise to fears of "spectacular" attacks in Afghanistan's cities and massacres at poorly guarded rural polling stations. There are also reports from the south of Arab and Chechen fighters joining the sputtering Taliban insurgency.

In Kabul yesterday, Sergeant Mark Cook from Nottingham was trying to spot suicide bombers among the Afghans who crowded up every time his three-vehicle British army patrol stopped. "They might be wearing baggy clothing or be sweating profusely," he said. "Sometimes they are reading verses written on their sleeves, and if the crowd clears off suddenly, that's a sign that something is about to happen."

Sgt Cook admitted that there wasn't really that much chance of spotting jihadis determined on martyrdom approaching his patrol, but the threat is considered a real one after the discovery of a suicide bomb belt in the city. In the past week aid workers have been catching planes out, UN offices have added massive blast barriers and Kabul's centre has become noticeably less crowded than usual as the fear of car bombs grows.

Sgt Cook's men from the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters were more careful than usual as they checked under bridges and culverts, and strained their eyes for anything that looked like a command wire or roadside bomb on the verges ahead as they bumped along tracks behind the airport, a frequent target of terrorist rockets.

"So far the most dangerous thing has been the locals' crazy driving," said 23-year-old Private Lee Wynn, also from Nottingham, with "Mam and Dad" tattooed on his arm. He was excited about being in a real war zone for the first time, although violence can erupt in unexpected places; a day earlier four German peacekeepers were injured in a rocket attack in the normally safe northern city of Kunduz. Many security experts have expressed

surprise that little has happened since three American contractors were killed by a bomb in August. Some Western soldiers privately wonder whether the next week could be the Taliban's last chance to prove they are still capable of carrying out major attacks.

The security situation has curtailed campaigning by the 18 candidates. On one of Hamid Karzai's rare forays out of his presidential palace, a rocket whistled overhead as his US military helicopter touched down in the provincial city of Gardez. It rapidly took off again. But he remains the front-runner for election, and the poll will almost certainly go ahead, whatever the risks.

Even strongly Taliban areas in the south and east are expected to vote after tribal delegations insisted on being included, with US military helicopters due to ferry ballot boxes back to some of the nine national counting stations, which themselves will be heavily protected by American soldiers.

Some observers are concerned at the military's involvement. Intimidation by warlords and a desperate shortage of international monitors to check the voting will also pose serious threats to the credibility of the election, Afghanistan's first chance to select a leader after years of war and bloody coups.

Colonel Charlie Darell, commander of British forces, does not believe the coming week will be as dangerous as some predict. "Suicide bombers are not really the Afghan way," he said. "Propping a rocket on some rocks and leaving it on a time delay, pointed vaguely at a target, is more common. I think al-Qa'ida is on the back foot, with a lot of their leadership hit.

"There is a perception that the Taliban may try to wreck the electoral process. Things could go wrong, but not to the extent of derailing the election."

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