

Karzai is declared poll victor

Run-off scrapped as West seeks power-sharing deal

Jeremy Page, Jerome Starkey Kabul

Almost ten weeks of political paralysis in Afghanistan was brought to a close yesterday when a presidential election run-off was cancelled and President Karzai was declared the winner following the withdrawal of his only rival.

Western leaders rushed to endorse the Independent Election Commission's decision and congratulate Mr Karzai, desperate to end a crisis which has undermined their efforts to defeat the Taliban and build democracy in Afghanistan.

Dr Abdullah Abdullah, who pulled out of the race on Sunday in protest at Mr Karzai's failure to tackle electoral fraud, also appeared tacitly to accept the decision after coming under intense pressure from the international community.

But questions remained over the legality of the result which gives Mr Karzai another five-year term in office. The Afghan leader is expected to make a victory speech today and will be inaugurated before world dignitaries later this month.

But his reelection lacks credibility because he did not win the necessary outright majority in the first round on

August 20, after which a UN-backed investigation disqualified a million of his votes because of fraud.

Western officials were also still trying to broker a power-sharing deal between Mr Karzai and Dr Abdullah to prevent a potentially dangerous split between the Tajik-dominated north and the predominantly Pashtun south.

"The point is Karzai's mandate is very, very, tenuous," Nick Horne, a

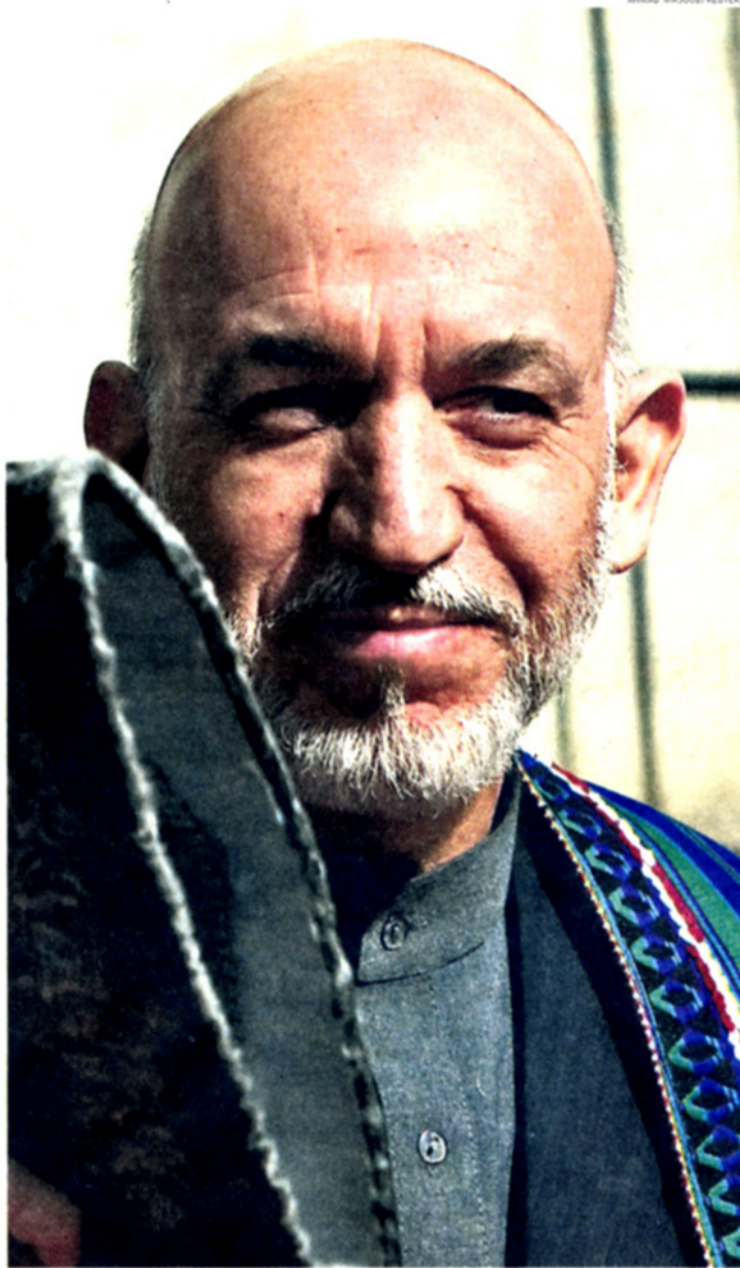
Karzai must now deliver real reform

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former UN political officer in Afghanistan who worked on the elections, told *The Times*.

The IEC, whose top officials were appointed by Mr Karzai, said it made the decision because of the cost and risk of organising Saturday's run-off, and because a one-horse race would compromise the President's legitimacy.

"The Independent Election Commission declares the esteemed Hamid Karzai
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A contented Hamid Karzai after Afghanistan's election commission declared him President for a second term yesterday

IN THE NEWS

BP secures deal over Iraq's biggest oilfield

British oil giant BP is taking control of Iraq's biggest oilfield in the first major energy deal since the US-led invasion, putting the country on a path to rival Saudi Arabia within a decade. Iraqi lawmakers have condemned the deal as "illegal". Page 8

Karadzic's 'one regret'

Radovan Karadzic's only regret at the 1995 Srebrenica massacre of 8,000 Muslim men and boys was that some got away, a prosecutor told the Bosnian Serb's war crimes trial in The Hague. Page 12

Pakistan bomb kills 34

At least 34 people were killed in a suicide bomb attack close to the Pakistani army's headquarters in Rawalpindi. It was the second attack in the high security zone within a month. Page 6

Fears for pirate couple

Fears rose yesterday for a British couple kidnapped by Somali pirates as reports suggested that Islamist militants are heading for the area where they are held and intend to seize them. Page 3

Litvinenko clouds talks

The ghost of Alexander Litvinenko, the dissident former agent killed in London, loomed large over attempts by Britain's Foreign Secretary David Miliband to thaw relations with Russia. Page 12

Mass sacrifice protest

Plans to sacrifice half a million animals in a two-day Hindu festival in Nepal this month have prompted calls by animal rights activists for the 300-year-old ritual to be banned. Page 9



Twin Towers ship sails in

The USS New York, a battleship built with steel from the World Trade Centre, sailed into New York harbour yesterday on its maiden voyage, with a 21-gun salute near Ground Zero. Page 14



China fixes early snow

Cloud-seeding by Chinese meteorologists led to the earliest blizzard in Beijing for two decades. The 11-hour snowfall brought the capital to a halt. Hundreds of flights were delayed. Page 14

Inside today

Space hotel for earthlings — but cost is astronomical

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