

Kabul Ready for Presidential Inauguration

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The city gets a makeover and officials tighten security as they await the arrival of dignitaries from around the world.

After winning a decisive victory in October polls, Hamed Karzai, the head of Afghanistan's interim government, is to be sworn in as president on December 7.

Dignitaries from around the globe - including United States Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell - are descending on the capital to attend the ceremony, to be held at the presidential palace. In anticipation, the Afghan authorities are giving the capital a facelift, as well as tightening security.

While Taleban militants have threatened to disrupt the ceremony, the Afghan security agencies have joined forces with the ministry of information and culture and the Kabul municipal government to make sure the ceremony goes off without a hitch.

Visiting dignitaries will be spared Kabul's potholed roads. Road crews have been busy in downtown Kabul putting down a fresh layer of asphalt on the city's main streets and painting traffic lines, a novelty for Afghanistan.

Nor will the VIPs have to cope with the capital's notorious traffic. Faqir Mohammad Bahram, Kabul's deputy mayor, said all the main roads and side streets from the airport in the eastern part of the city to the Intercontinental Hotel located in the northwest of the city would be closed to traffic.

The government is also busy sprucing up the city's trash-strewn streets. The trunks of all the trees in the centre of the city have been painted white, and traffic roundabouts in the city centre have been festooned with multi-coloured lights.

Officials are also trying to keep some of the capital's most destitute citizens out of sight. A month ago, the ministry of women's affairs, the interior ministry and the Afghan Red Crescent launched a joint operation to sweep the large population of beggars off the streets and place them in a shelter.

That effort, however, was only partially successful. "The beggars complained about the food and accommodation," said Bahram.

But more important than creating a "Potemkin village" version of Kabul is security.

Organisers are working hard to seal off the city from potential threats.

General Zaher Azimi, spokesman for the ministry of defence, said "hundreds" of foreign and Afghan dignitaries would be taking part in the inauguration ceremony. Given those numbers, security will be tight.

"Forces of the interior ministry, the Afghan national army, the intelligence department and ISAF [NATO-led

International Security Assistance Force] peacekeepers have taken coordinated measures to protect all these dignitaries against potential terrorist attacks on this historic day," said Azimi.

According to news reports, the Taliban have threatened to launch attacks during the festivities. Militants made a similar promise to disrupt national elections on October 9, but major attacks did not materialise.

The Afghan military is still taking no chances. According to Azimi, the army has already conducted two exercises so as to be well prepared for the inauguration.

ISAF, which helped bolster Afghan security during the election, will also help provide protection for the ceremony.

"We are very aware that [the inauguration] is yet another opportunity for insurgent activity to take place while the international community's eyes are again focused on Afghanistan," said ISAF spokesman Lieutenant-Commander Ken MacKillop.

ISAF support will not be limited to security operations. MacKillop said ISAF would also help coordinate air traffic control. Kabul International Airport is expecting a major surge in traffic, and the ISAF air task force is working with the authorities to ensure that things go smoothly.

Life in the capital is expected to come to a standstill. Many employees are being given the day off. According to Agence France-Presse, all streets in the centre of the capital will be closed to traffic in the hours leading up to the 11:30 am ceremony.

As part of the effort to secure city roads, authorities have told all street vendors and shopkeepers to remove the awnings that usually shield their stalls from sun.

Anosha Ahmadi, a presidential spokeswoman, told AFP, "Most of the streets are going to be closed, and you had better stay at home."

For the many residents of the capital who will be following that advice, Afghan radio and television are preparing blanket coverage of the event.

Said Nadir Ahmadi, deputy head of government-owned Afghanistan Radio and Television, said the ceremony would be aired in all provinces of the country and in some neighbouring countries as well. He promised full and uninterrupted coverage, with the live broadcast preceded by a roundtable about people's perceptions of the government.

"We will air this ceremony live and without any censorship," said Ahmadi.

The swearing-in ceremony will last for one and a half hours. It will be followed by a lunch at the foreign ministry and a series of meetings with foreign dignitaries.

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