

From VOA Learning English this is As It Is.

Welcome back to the show. I'm Caty Weaver.

After more than ten years of war, Afghanistan faces another difficult year ahead. In 2014, all international combat forces are to withdraw from the country. The amount of aid money coming into the country will slow, rebel violence will likely continue, the economy will likely remain weak, and there will be a presidential election. We'll have a report from Kabul.

Pakistan will continue to have a major influence on events in Afghanistan next year. But the good news is relations between the two countries are improving. We'll have a report from Islamabad.

Afghanistan: the year in review and a look at the future for the troubled country and its relations with neighboring Pakistan -- on As It Is today.

Now, Christopher Cruise has a report from VOA Reporter Sharon Behn in Kabul on the challenges ahead for Afghanistan.

Afghanistan Faces Election, Security Challenges in 2014

This April, Afghanistan will choose its first government since the U.S. intervention that does not include Afghan leader Hamid Karzai.

Critics say Mr. Karzai has changed greatly since his start as a dependable U.S. ally. They say over time he has become an unpredictable leader who upsets both his foreign partners and his Afghan allies.

Still, Mr. Karzai is seen as a force for continuity in Afghanistan. And young people growing up in busy cities like Kabul have expectations of a better future.

Kate Clark works for the non-profit research group Afghanistan Analysts Network. She says fierce power struggles and lawlessness in the country mean it is unlikely next year's election will be free and fair.

“The ideal is that you have someone that has a popular consensus. And I think that’s difficult. The fraud is so much that you are not going to get everyone happy, and it’s a question of how messy it’s going to be.”

There are also questions about what will happen to U.S. forces now in Afghanistan. Mr. Karzai has refused to sign a joint security agreement that would keep some of them in the country to train, assist and equip Afghan forces.

The nation’s tribal elders approved the security deal, but Mr. Karzai ignored them. He said the agreement should only be signed after the elections and peace and security are established in the country.

Taliban militants also rejected the proposed security agreement. And there does not appear to be any progress toward a peace agreement between the government and militants.

Former Afghan High Peace Council member Abdul Hakim Mujahid once was a member of the Taliban. He says Afghanistan would be putting at risk some of the gains it has made if it cannot reach a deal with the militants.

“If we couldn’t reach a political settlement and we went to the general election, and a president came in power who is not assured of a political settlement, we will (have) lost at least five years, unfortunately for peace, and we will for more five years, and the fighting and the crisis will be continued for more than five years in this country.”

Afghan forces are increasingly taking the lead in security from international forces. But security forces are also losing members at a high rate -- from resignations, injuries and other reasons. In July, the U.S. Defense Department reported that in March, deaths and injuries of Afghan troops grew to more than 300 a month.

Afghanistan expert Kate Clark says that, as of September, Afghan security forces were dying at the rate of 100 per week.

I’m Christopher Cruise in Washington.

You are listening to As It Is from VOA Learning English.

Now here again is Caty Weaver with a report from VOA's Ayaz Gul in Islamabad on the state of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Some Progress in Relations Between Afghanistan and Pakistan

Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to disagree on many important issues. But they also reported progress in 2013 on efforts to improve their relations. Experts say the two nations must cooperate closely to end the Afghan war as NATO prepares to end its combat operations there.

Pakistan's reported links to Taliban forces in Afghanistan have caused great tension between the two governments. The tension began as soon as the Islamist group was ousted from power in 2001.

Many Afghans say Pakistan supports some militant groups in Afghanistan in order to hold some influence in the country after international forces leave. Pakistani leaders have repeatedly denied the accusation.

Humayun Shah Asefi is a top Afghan opposition politician.

“We must try both of us, to evaluate our relations to have some trust building measures but some people must not think that Afghanistan is the backyard of Pakistan. They must recognize that Afghanistan is a sovereign state.”

Like Pakistan, Afghanistan’s central government struggles to control parts of its territory. For years, Afghanistan has accused Pakistani officials of permitting militants to launch attacks across the border into Afghanistan. This year, Pakistan accused Afghanistan of such action.

President Hamid Karzai spoke about the issue on Pakistani television in June. He admitted that anti-Pakistani militants operate on Afghan territory. But he also said it was not his fault.

“Yes they are there. Yes they are there because of war created against Afghanistan by the establishment in Pakistan. This is the consequence of the activities from across the Durand Line in Pakistan towards Afghanistan.”

The Durand Line is the 2,500-kilometer-long mountainous border between the two countries. Since last year, Pakistan has fired thousands of artillery shells over that line into Afghanistan. Pakistan says it is targeting militant bases.

Pakistani Senator Afrasiab Khattak says the lawless border areas are a problem.

“The real issue is not border management. The real issue is sourcing out borders to militants...I think we have to stop this.”

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was elected in June. Since then, Afghan officials have welcomed Pakistan’s moves to free militants who could be helpful in peace talks with the Taliban.

Mr. Sharif visited Afghanistan recently and said peace in Pakistan is closely linked to a secure Afghanistan.

“We have stood by Afghanistan, we will continue to stand by Afghanistan and we have no favorites in Afghanistan. Our favorite of course is the people of Afghanistan.”

Pakistani officials worry about possible disorder in Afghanistan after NATO troops withdraw.

And that’s all the time we have today.

I’m Caty Weaver. Thanks for listening.