

RELEASE IN PART B6

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From: Rhodes, Benjamin J. <[REDACTED]>
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APRIL 3, 2010, 2:48 P.M. ET

Karzai Slams the West Again

By MATTHEW ROSENBERG And HABIB ZAHORI

KABUL, Afghanistan—President Hamid Karzai lashed out at his Western backers for the second time in three days on Saturday, accusing the U.S. of interfering in Afghan affairs and saying the Taliban insurgency would become a legitimate resistance movement if the meddling doesn't stop.

Mr. Karzai, whose government is propped up by billions of dollars in Western aid and nearly 100,000 American troops fighting the Taliban, made the comments during a private meeting with about 60 or 70 Afghan lawmakers.

At one point, Mr. Karzai suggested that he himself would be compelled to join the Taliban if the Parliament didn't back his controversial attempt to take control of the country's electoral watchdog from the United Nations, according to two of those who attended the meeting. The people included a close ally of the president.

Mr. Karzai's latest remarks came less than 24 hours after he assured U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that he was committed to working with the U.S. That phone call followed a similar, but less vitriolic, anti-Western diatribe that the Afghan president delivered earlier in the week.

After Friday's call, U.S. and Afghan officials said they were putting the incident behind them and moving on.

Mr. Karzai's fresh round of accusations against the U.S. and its allies laid bare his deep distrust of the West and was likely to further damage an already bruised relationship. The U.S. Embassy here declined to comment on Saturday's speech.

Five of the lawmakers who attended the two-and-a-half-hour meeting said it largely consisted of the president lambasting them for rejecting a few days earlier his attempt to take control of the country's Electoral Complaints Commission. They quoted Mr. Karzai as saying that the lawmakers were being used by Western officials who want to install a "puppet government" in Afghanistan.

Waheed Omar, a spokesman for Mr. Karzai, denied that the president said he would join the Taliban or accused the West of trying to control Afghanistan. "He talked about the new electoral law and asked the members of Parliament to reconsider their decision," Mr. Omar said.

The lower house of Afghanistan's Parliament rejected almost unanimously a decree issued in February by Mr. Karzai that gave him the power to appoint all five members of the electoral commission. The upper house has yet to vote on the decree.

The commission previously had been made up of three foreign, U.N.-appointed members, one Afghan named by the Supreme Court and another appointed by the Afghan human-rights commission.

The electoral commission threw out as fraudulent nearly a million votes cast for Mr. Karzai during last year's presidential election, ordering a runoff vote. The runoff didn't take place because the runner-up candidate withdrew from the race.

Fresh Parliamentary elections are slated for September, and Mr. Karzai's control over the commission could benefit candidates allied with him, potentially producing a more pliant legislature.

Despite securing re-election, associates of Mr. Karzai say the events around the vote left the president feeling betrayed by the West. Those feelings were clear in a speech Mr. Karzai gave Thursday, accusing "foreign embassies," the U.N. and the European Union of being behind the electoral fraud and of trying to force him into a coalition government with his opponents.

While Mr. Karzai didn't dwell on those accusations Saturday, he did return to the broader theme of foreign interference, saying that it was the main cause of the insurgency, according to five lawmakers who attended the meeting.

"He said that the only reason that the Taliban and other insurgent groups are fighting the Afghan government is that they see foreigners having the final say in everything," said one of the lawmakers.

All five lawmakers said Mr. Karzai told those who gathered at the palace that the Taliban's "revolt will change to resistance" if the U.S. and its allies kept dictating how his government should run. The word "resistance" is a term often used to convey the idea of a legitimate struggle against unjust rulers, such as the mujahedeen's fight against the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

President Karzai's remarks were the latest sign of the growing rift between the Afghan leader and the U.S, which is pouring troops into the country in a bid to reverse the Taliban's momentum and win the support of ordinary Afghans.

Key to the surge strategy is restoring the battered domestic reputation of Mr. Karzai's administration. During a brief visit to Kabul on Monday, President Barack Obama pressed Mr. Karzai to clean up the pervasive corruption in his government.

If anything, President Obama's visit appears to have backfired. A businessman with close ties to President Karzai said the Afghan leader was insulted by Mr. Obama's comments and was left with even greater doubts about the American commitment to Afghanistan.

At the time of the visit, U.S. officials said they intended it to signal their determination to stabilize Afghanistan.