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US-Afghan deal edges closer despite 'immunity' snag

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A long-delayed security deal on the future of US forces in Afghanistan is close to being completed, officials said Sunday,

after marathon talks in Kabul between President Hamid Karzai and US Secretary of State John Kerry.

Both sides said that the issue of US troop immunity remained a sticking

pointing after intense efforts to hammer out a deal that would allow between 5,000 and 10,000 US soldiers to remain in Afghanistan after 2014.

US officials travelling with Kerry said that only details of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) had not been agreed, and that the US and Afghan teams would now review the draft document.

"From our vantage, (the visit was) positive in that we reached a basic

agreement on all of the key issues," a senior US official told reporters as Kerry flew out of Kabul for London.

"The language also provides what we need in terms of assurances and

guarantees for rights of self-defense, for force protection, and the jurisdiction issues."

Both Kerry and Karzai said at a press conference late Saturday that the

issue of jurisdiction -- or "troop immunity" -- had not been solved, but US officials gave an upbeat assessment on the chances of the pact being signed. "Overall, the text, we believe, is in a good place," one official told reporters.

At the press conference, Karzai said a national assembly of tribal elders would be called to discuss whether foreign soldiers could be given immunity from prosecution in Afghanistan.

Kerry said that without the issue being resolved "unfortunately there cannot be a bilateral security agreement."

US troops still in Afghanistan after 2014 will help fight Al-Qaeda remnants and train the national army. "The language of the agreement as it stands right now provides what we need for both of those missions," the US official said after Kerry delayed his flight to Europe for about 12-hours as the talks were repeatedly extended.

A similar US security agreement with Iraq in 2011 collapsed over the issue of troop immunity and the US pulled its troops out of the country, which is now suffering its worst sectarian violence since 2008.

But Afghan officials have always dismissed the possibility that the US may enact the "zero option" of a complete pull-out after its soldiers have fought the Taliban militants since 2001.

The US wants the security deal signed by October 31 to enable the NATO

military coalition to plan its withdrawal of 87,000 combat troops from

Afghanistan by December 2014, but Karzai had threatened to walk away from talks.

The Afghan leader said on Saturday that key areas where progress was made included the US agreeing not to conduct unilateral military operations against militants after 2014.

"There will be no arbitrary actions and operations by the US, and a written document has been given to guarantee the protection of lives and properties of our people," he said.

Karzai has had an uneven relationship with the US and other foreign allies since he came to power in 2001, often sparking outrage with his criticism of international military efforts to thwart Taliban insurgents.

A credible election to choose Karzai's successor next year is seen as the key test of Afghan stability as NATO troops withdraw, and Kerry stressed the US would support a free and fair vote.

The hardline Taliban regime was driven from power by a US-led coalition in 2001 for sheltering the Al-Qaeda leaders behind the 9/11 attacks.

Since then, the Islamist rebels have fought a bloody insurgency, and the US and Afghan governments now back peace talks to end the conflict.

Kerry flew to London after dropping a planned visit to Paris due to his extended talks in Kabul.