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Hagel Bypasses Karzai in Afghanistan Visit with Troops

By David Lerman and Eltaf Najafizada –
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Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan today and said he has no intention of meeting with President Hamid Karzai, who has resisted signing a security agreement to extend the U.S.'s military presence past 2014.

As U.S. frustration with Karzai grows amid his shifting demands for completing a security deal, Hagel said he saw no benefit in a session with the Afghan president.

“I don’t think pressure coming from the United States, or more pressure, is going to be helpful in persuading President Karzai to sign” the draft security agreement backed by Afghan tribal elders, Hagel said. “That’s not my role, to pressure presidents.”

The decision to bypass Karzai came after National Security Adviser Susan Rice visited the Afghan president late last month to urge him to back the accord.

“There is not much I can add in a meeting with President Karzai to what’s already been said,” Hagel told reporters after arriving at the U.S. coalition’s headquarters in Kabul.

Hagel said he didn’t request a meeting with Karzai and didn’t get an invitation for one. The Pentagon chief did meet with Afghan Defense Minister Bismullah Khan Mohammadi and

commander of the Afghan National Army General Sher Mohammad Karimi, and discussed the need for the security pact.

The accord would allow for U.S. forces to train and assist Afghanistan's army after 2014, when most U.S. troops will come home from a war now in its 13th year.

Prejudice Concern

Some Afghan experts within the administration said they thought sending Rice to prod Karzai was a blunder by a White House that often acts independently of diplomatic, intelligence and military professionals. Despite the continuing U.S. effort to erase prejudice in Afghanistan against women and people of color, it persists, and therefore being confronted by an African-American woman was humiliating to Karzai and may have helped stiffen his position, said three officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal administration politics.

In the efforts to reach the agreement, Karzai has raised objections about military operations that he says put Afghan civilians at risk. He also has suggested he may not be ready to sign the accord until after Afghanistan's election to choose his successor in April.

Frustration Evident

Hagel's avoidance of Karzai was the clearest indication so far of the Obama administration's frustration with the Afghan leader. Earlier this week, Secretary of State John Kerry said Karzai could designate someone else, such as his defense minister, to sign the security agreement in his place.

In bypassing Karzai in his own homeland, Hagel delivered a "big surprise" to the Afghan leader, said Ahmad Saeedi, a political and security analyst in Kabul, in a phone interview.

With Karzai balking at signing the security accord, the U.S. is now "trying to convince Karzai through dealing with his inner circle's influential folks" to reconsider his position, Saeedi said.

U.S. officials have warned in recent weeks that the lack of a deal risks undermining confidence in the Afghan government while unsettling allies.

'Capital Flight'

Without the deal in place, "we've seen capital flight," said General Joseph Dunford, the top commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, who spoke to reporters in Kabul today. "We've seen real estate prices go down" in the country.

Dunford said he will have to start planning for alternatives, including the possibility of a complete withdrawal next year, if the agreement isn't signed by the end of this month.

Dunford defended Hagel's decision not to seek a meeting with Karzai, saying the status of the security accord "is now largely an Afghan issue."

Hagel said the Afghan defense minister told him the security agreement “would be signed in a timely manner.”

He said his two-day visit, which followed a meeting in Bahrain, “was planned for the sole purpose of working with our troops, thanking our troops.”

Avoiding Karzai may signal a hands-off approach toward him by the Obama administration after repeated attempts at negotiation led nowhere, said Martine van Bijlert, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

‘Next in Line’

“The palace had probably expected Hagel to be the next in line trying to persuade Karzai,” van Bijlert said. “Not doing so sends the message that it is now really up to Karzai to decide how far he wants to take his position” on the security agreement.

Karzai has rejected Kerry’s proposal to let the country’s defense minister or other senior officials sign the agreement as his designate. He “won’t allow” any senior Afghan officials to sign the accord until his conditions are met by U.S., said Fayiq Wahidi, Karzai’s deputy spokesman, in a phone interview.

Karzai had set two major conditions: a complete cessation of U.S. forces raiding Afghan homes and the start of a peace process with Taliban guerrillas, Wahidi said.

Dunford said U.S. and allied forces “are not entering Afghan homes today” except in rare instances and always with Afghan forces taking the lead. “We respect Afghan sovereignty,” he said.

He said he saw “no strong indication” that reconciliation with the Taliban is possible.