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Kabul braced for Obama's tougher stance

By Daniel Dombey in Washington and Jon Boone in Kabul

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The presidential palace in Kabul is viewing Barack Obama's move into the White House next week with great unease.

Hillary Clinton, who is poised to become US secretary of state in a matter of days, labelled Afghanistan this week a "narco state" whose government was "plagued by limited capacity and widespread corruption".

Setting out the tough approach of the incoming administration, Mrs Clinton said the US would "tie aid to better performance by the Afghan national government, including anticorruption initiatives and efforts to extend the rule of law across the country".

The US government has provided more than \$32bn (£22bn) to Afghanistan since 2001. The Obama administration says it wants to increase non-military aid further, as well as ramping up the posting of US troops.

The conduct and make-up of the Afghan government are of huge importance to Mr Obama and Mrs Clinton, who labels Afghanistan and the Pakistani border as "the central front in the 'war on terror' ". But Mrs Clinton's comments, in written answers provided for her Senate confirmation hearing, are only the latest sign that relations with the new US administration are likely to be stormy, contrasting with the friendly ties that George W. Bush and President Hamid Karzai have enjoyed since the Afghan leader took office in 2002.

A visit by Joe Biden caused particular disquiet last year when the future vice-president-elect became so irritated with Mr Karzai that he brought the meeting to an abrupt close.

Nor do Mr Obama's own encounters with Mr Karzai appear to have been wholly congenial. Mrs Clinton remarked bluntly in her testimony that "Afghanistan needs a government more able to take care of its people's needs - something the president-elect has communicated directly to President Karzai".

Still more biting criticism comes from Richard Holbrooke, the former US ambassador to the UN now expected to become a special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. He said, at a conference in Washington in May, of the Afghan government: "It is weak; it is corrupt; it has a very thin leadership veneer; it is internally divided; it has never arrested any major drug lords." He added that when he mentioned the last point to Mr Karzai, "he seemed to think [it] was amusing".

Mr Holbrooke argued that the shortcomings of the Afghan government were of huge strategic import in the war against the Taliban because "the only way our side can win is if the government does a better job".

He said the question of whether to support Mr Karzai for a third term would be "one of the half dozen most important tactical decisions the next [US] president will make", adding that "there are plenty of qualified impressive Afghans in the country".

US diplomats said they supported the democratic process, not any one candidate. But one long-serving US official in Afghanistan predicts that "everything will change on January 21", as the new administration ditches "the blind support we saw during the Bush years", adding that the Obama team will "order" Mr Karzai to remove corrupt officials.

The official contended that Mr Karzai got an easy ride from Mr Bush long after Afghanistan had deteriorated because the White House was desperate for a success story, particularly in the years when the war in Iraq was faring badly. "They were just in complete denial."

Another western diplomat in Kabul said the Obama administration could present Mr. Karzai with a series of options that would allow him to make a graceful exit, possibly a comfortable retirement abroad.

But many senior diplomats in Kabul contended that, as the incumbent, Mr Karzai is still the most likely person to win the presidential poll this year, if security permits the vote to go ahead.