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Reuters

## Taliban concessions unlikely

Peter Graff

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Kabul - President Hamid Karzai has launched a high profile push to reconcile with his “disenchanted brothers” in the Taliban, but few in Afghanistan see hope for a quick breakthrough while fighters smell victory on the battlefield.

At a conference in London last week, the international community backed Karzai’s efforts to start talks and donors promised hundreds of millions of dollars for a new fund to pay fighters to lay down their arms.

Karzai has called on Taliban leaders to attend a “loya jirga” peace council which he hopes to hold within weeks. He will travel this week to Saudi Arabia, which has helped in the past in efforts to reach out to militants.

Western countries, eyeing an exit from an eight-year-old war that they no longer believe has a purely military solution, are more amenable than ever to a role for rehabilitated Taliban.

They hope that a major offensive this year backed by 30,000 extra US troops - whose first big operation is expected to be launched within days - will help push the Taliban to the negotiating table.

But at a time when fighters are tightening their hold over much of the country and inflicting record losses on a superpower that already says it will start pulling out next year, it is hard to see why guerrillas would agree to lay down their arms.

So far the Taliban show no sign of backing away from their main demand that all Western forces withdraw from Afghanistan before they will enter talks.

“These efforts will not bear fruit,” said Wahid Mujdah, a writer who served in the foreign ministry under the Taliban. “I do not see any change, because the Taliban are abiding by their old stance and I cannot see anything new on the part of Karzai either.”

On the battlefield, Washington says it expects to make firm progress this year that can push fighters to talks, but results, at least in the short term, are likely to be bloody and mixed.

A first “surge” of US troops ordered by Obama early in 2009 has given the 110,000-strong Nato-led force more control of one of the main Taliban heartlands in Helmand province. A second surge of another 30,000 announced by Obama in December will have its first impact this month with another big advance in Helmand.

Yet while the Americans have been able to make gains in districts where their extra troops are active, fighters have been on the march elsewhere, creating Taliban shadow governments in places in the north and west once under Kabul’s control.

Militants have been able to inflict unprecedented casualties on Western forces, hurting public support for the war in key US allies such as Britain and Canada, and have mounted ever-bolder commando-style raids on provincial capitals and Kabul itself.

In announcing the additional troops, Obama also said he would begin withdrawing them in mid-2011, a move seen among many Afghans as giving the Taliban an incentive to run out the clock.

So far, the Taliban have not replied to Karzai’s invitation to attend the loya jirga, a traditional meeting of elders which has been used to resolve national crises throughout centuries of Afghan history.