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Reuters

Taliban reject renewed Karzai call for peace

By Sayed Salahuddin

02/21/2010

Afghanistan's Taliban on Sunday rejected President Hamid Karzai's latest call for peace, despite pressure from a NATO offensive and the capture of its number 2.

Karzai renewed his appeal in parliament on Saturday for the Taliban to accept his peace proposal.

At a conference on Afghanistan in London in January, donor nations backed his plans for peace talks with those militants who renounce violence and pledged hundreds of millions of dollars to persuade fighters to lay down weapons.

The Taliban have repeatedly turned down Karzai's peace proposals, saying foreign troops should leave Afghanistan first, but some tentative "talks about talks" have taken place.

"Karzai is a puppet he cannot represent a nation or a government," said Taliban spokesman Qari Mohammad Yousuf, commenting on Karzai's call for the Taliban to work for peace and reconstruction.

"He is bogged down in corruption and is surrounded by warlords who are making themselves rich."

The Taliban, who have made a steady comeback since being ousted after a 2001 U.S.-led invasion, are under pressure.

HEAT ON TALIBAN

Three senior Taliban officials were captured in Pakistan this month, including the group's number 2 and top military commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar -- the highest profile Taliban leader to be grabbed.

NATO is pushing ahead with one of its largest assaults in Afghanistan since the start of the war, aimed at driving the Taliban from their last big stronghold in the country's most violent province to make way for Afghan authorities to take over.

Taliban fighters remain defiant, digging in for a fight to the death against an assault that tests U.S. President Barack Obama's strategy of sending 30,000 more troops to seize insurgent-held areas before a planned 2011 troop drawdown begins.

"In Marjah, determined resistance is again reported in some areas. The Regional Command-South commander believes the clearing phase is progressing well and will take at least 30 days to complete," said the International Security Assistance Force.

The resilience of the Taliban has raised questions about how long Western countries can afford to stick it out in Afghanistan.

Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende's coalition government collapsed on Saturday when the two largest parties failed to agree on whether to withdraw troops from Afghanistan this year as planned.

The fall of the government in the EU country, just two days short of the coalition's third anniversary, all but guarantees that the 2,000 Dutch troops will be brought home this year.

That would be the first major crack in the coalition of some 40 nations battling a steadily increasing Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

Yousuf questioned how 15,000 NATO and Afghan troops with air support could not sweep through Marjah, the focus of the offensive, in Helmand province in the south.

"Our resistance is going on unabatedly day and night. They (troops) are facing resistance in all corners of Marjah, he said.

NATO says 12 of its troops have died in the fighting since the offensive started eight days ago. Yousuf said the Taliban have lost 14 fighters.