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Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, threatens to block Nato offensive

Stephen Grey

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The president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, has cast doubt over Nato's planned summer offensive against the Taliban in the southern province of Kandahar, as more than 10,000 American troops pour in for the fight.

Karzai threatened to delay or even cancel the operation — one of the biggest of the nine-year war — after being confronted in Kandahar by elders who said it would bring strife, not security, to his home province.

Visiting last week to rally support for the offensive, the president was instead overwhelmed by a barrage of complaints about corruption and misrule. As he was heckled at a shura of 1,500 tribal leaders and elders, he appeared to offer them a veto over military action. "Are you happy or unhappy for the operation to be carried out?" he asked.

The elders shouted back: "We are not happy."

"Then until the time you say you are happy, the operation will not happen," Karzai replied.

General Stanley McChrystal, the Nato commander, who was sitting behind him, looked distinctly apprehensive. The remarks have compounded US anger and bewilderment with Karzai,

who has already accused the United States of rigging last year's presidential elections and even threatened to switch sides to join the Taliban.

For President Barack Obama, the battle to drive the Taliban from their heartland is seen as the main test of his "surge" strategy to send 30,000 extra US troops to Afghanistan. The United States calls Kandahar the "centre of gravity" of the war in Afghanistan.

Senior commanders and diplomats emphasise, however, that success would depend on action by Karzai to eliminate corruption and set up a form of local government.

Nato's plans envisage political manoeuvres, from a purge of provincial leadership to the creation of precinct councils, to tackle the roots of the Taliban rebellion. The aim is to wrest power from so-called warlords — including the president's own brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai.

With the Afghan president increasingly regarded as "gone rogue", hopes of such action were fading. One US official said after the shura that Karzai had proved neither a reliable ally nor popular with his own people: "He can rail against the West all he likes — no one wants him to look like a foreign puppet. The trouble is, his erratic speeches are matched by erratic actions. That's why this tension is undermining the offensive."

The latest row began when Karzai decried "huge fraud" in the elections, saying it was "done by the foreigners". After telephoning Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, the next day to clarify his remarks, Karzai escalated the attack. Witnesses said he told MPs at a private meeting: "If I come under foreign pressure, I might join the Taliban." His spokesman hastily denied it.

In Kandahar he persisted, deflecting complaints against himself with further criticism of outsiders and saying he had now "rescued myself from foreigners' orders".

Few elders at the shura seemed impressed. They pressed for a purge of his officials. "If we speak out and if we tell you the truth of what's happening here, we will not last the night," said one elder. "We will be assassinated. Everyone is scared."

A white-bearded frail man stood up, leaning on a walking stick, and said: "The other day people came with guns and told me to shut my shop and go to my house. I phoned the police. They said, 'It's none of our business and we don't care'."

Sitting just off the stage at the meeting was the president's brother. Ahmed Wali Karzai is the head of Kandahar provincial council and is alleged by US officials to profit from drug trafficking and organised crime. The president is reported to have refused US requests to remove him from his post.

On the streets of the city this weekend there appeared to be little or no support for a Nato push in the province. "Look what happened in Marjah," said one local government official in Kandahar, referring to the last US offensive launched in February in central Helmand province.

"The US controls the place by day but the Taliban control it by night. What is the point? If you help the government, you will be murdered."

At a popular coffee shop in the city centre, Khaled, a medical student from Kabul, said the influence of the Taliban was creeping back into the area.

“A Nato offensive here will not help,” he added.

“We know what they do. They arrive in great numbers and provide security for two weeks and then they go and the insecurity returns.”

General Karl Eikenberry, the US ambassador to Afghanistan, had warned Clinton about Karzai’s character last year. He said that McChrystal’s proposals for a a troop surge should not be supported unless the president changed.

“President Karzai is not an adequate strategic partner,” he wrote in a telegram that was later leaked.