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Afghan interior, intel chiefs replaced over attack

By MATTHEW PENNINGTON

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KABUL, Afghanistan – Afghan President Hamid Karzai removed two of the country's top security officials — each with longtime ties to American forces — over an attack on a national conference exploring peace with the Taliban.

The removals Sunday of the interior minister and intelligence chief surprised U.S. officials and may cause major disruption within Afghanistan's intelligence and security establishment at a critical juncture — as the U.S. and NATO escalate the war and the Afghan government commits to offering peace to the insurgents.

The move is likely to fuel speculation over differences within the Karzai administration over its efforts to reconcile with the Taliban — including the possible release of hundreds of detained militant suspects.

The head of the National Directorate of Security, Amrullah Saleh, was a senior figure in the Northern Alliance that helped the U.S. oust the Taliban regime in 2001. As a young man, Interior Minister Hanif Atmar served in Afghanistan's Communist-era intelligence agency and fought mujahedeen opposed to the Soviet occupation.

"It's a very significant event. There will be a massive fallout from these resignations both in the Interior Ministry and the NDS as alliances are shuffled," said Candace Rondeaux, senior analyst on Afghanistan for the International Crisis Group think tank.

"They appear to be forced resignations, and reflect significant worries of Karzai's administration over the loyalty of those leading key security agencies in the country," she said.

Sunday's resignations were a surprise — not least as the attack on the jirga last week was thwarted. Security officials have rarely faced punishment or resigned over previous major attacks in the capital.

Replacing the security chiefs comes after Karzai's May visit to Washington that eased strains in the bilateral relationship.

"Both the ministers of interior and intelligence are people we admire and whose service we appreciate," Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell said. He also noted the U.S. had favored Atmar for the interior ministry job.

But Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said in a statement he respected the Afghan president's authority to make this "difficult decision."

He said he remained confident in Karzai's "ability to appoint credible replacements to lead these critical organizations."

Saleh, an ethnic Tajik, had served as intelligence chief since 2004 and had a long-standing relationship with the CIA in the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaida.

British-educated Atmar, a former education minister, was first appointed interior minister in a 2008 Cabinet reshuffle aimed at rooting out high-level corruption in Karzai's government. He was reappointed after Karzai's re-election.

Two Taliban militants fired rockets where some 1,500 delegates — including lawmakers, tribal and religious chiefs — had gathered in a grand tent. One of the missiles landed about 200 yards (meters) away, but no delegates were hurt. The militants were later killed in a gunbattle with security forces in a house about a mile (1.5 kilometers) away.

Saleh said evidence showed the Haqqani network, a Pakistan-based Afghan Taliban faction with close ties to al-Qaida, was behind the attack.

Interior Ministry spokesman Zemer Bashary said the two attackers were able to breach security by dressing as a couple — one in a man's street clothes and the other in a woman's burqa, and clutching a Kalashnikov rifle and a grenade launcher wrapped up in cloth like a swaddled baby.

Karzai's office said in a statement he accepted the resignations because Atmar and Saleh had given unsatisfactory explanations. He appointed their deputies Munir Mangal at the interior ministry and Ibrahim Spinzada at intelligence as acting chiefs.

U.S. officials contend the Taliban leadership — which is demanding the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan — feels little reason to negotiate because it believes it is winning the war, which is only growing ever more bloody nearly nine years after it began.

On Sunday, five NATO troops — including four Americans — were killed in three separate incidents , the coalition said.