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Karzai endorses Kandahar operation

Afghan residents fear NATO-led campaign will lead to more bloodshed

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan - President Hamid Karzai gave the green light to a major security crackdown in the Taliban birthplace of Kandahar on Sunday, assuring residents that the operation was aimed at battling corruption and bad government as much as the insurgents.

Hundreds of tribal and religious leaders, sitting cross-legged in a steamy conference hall, publicly endorsed the plan, although Afghan officials acknowledged that skepticism remains over the high-stakes operation, seen as a possible turning point in the nearly 9-year-old war.

Afghan and international forces already have started to ramp up security, raising fears among the estimated half-million people living in and around the city that military action will lead to more bloodshed. Karzai worked to allay those fears, saying the operation would not resemble a heavy military offensive replete with tanks and airstrikes that could endanger civilians.

"The cleaning-up operation will start first inside Kandahar city and then we will go to the districts," Karzai said, urging those in the audience to put aside fears of retaliation and join him in retaking control of the city from insurgents, criminals and wealthy powerbrokers.

"We need your cooperation with this operation," he said. "I don't accept any excuse for not cooperating. We want this operation to be successful."

NATO officials pleased

That message pleased NATO officials who said it was important for Karzai, as president of the country, to publicly take ownership of the operation. U.S. commanders believe control of Kandahar, the provincial capital, is the key to wresting the ethnic Pashtun south away from the Taliban.

It was only the second time in recent years that Karzai had visited his home province. His government has little presence there and insurgents have exploited public discontent with the central government in Kabul to win broad support in the strategic region.

Militants have responded to the security crackdown with a rash of attacks targeting those who support the government and its international partners. So far this month, at least 40 international troops have been killed in Afghanistan, including 27 Americans.

Karzai expressed sadness over the death of 56 people last week when a 13-year-old suicide bomber detonated his vest of explosives at a wedding party in a village near Kandahar. Yet the grisly attack rallied support among the war-weary public to tighten security in the city.

The president, who had red flowers tucked in his turban, reiterated his call to the Taliban to renounce violence, break with al-Qaida and cut relations with intelligence agencies in other nations.

A report issued Sunday by the London School of Economics said Pakistan's main spy agency continues to arm and train the Taliban despite U.S. pressure to sever ties and

billions in aid to combat the militants. The findings — rejected by Pakistani army spokesman Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas — could heighten tension between the two countries and raise further questions about U.S. success in Afghanistan.

While Karzai urged the Taliban to halt their violence, he used much of his 45-minute talk to denounce corruption among police, private security guards and local powerbrokers. He pounded the podium and won applause when he said that corruption was undermining security as his government and foreign partners struggle to turn back a resurgent Taliban. He also said international contracting was not void of waste and graft.

The president said he had given Kandahar Gov. Tooryalai Wesa authority to fire corrupt public servants, and urged those in the audience to turn in anyone — even his closest supporters — if they are guilty of corruption or gaining wealth illegally.

Afterward, Ahmad Wali Karzai, the president's influential half brother who is among Kandahar's most powerful figures, told reporters that it was good that the president boldly denounced corruption.

He also said that favorable response from those at the meeting amounted to a green light for the security operation.

"The military operation is always a concern," he said. "The way the president described the military operation, there will no longer be a concern from the people."

During the president's last visit to Kandahar in April, he told about 2,000 leaders and residents that there would be no offensive without community support.

"To bring peace and stability to Kandahar, you should be beside us and stand beside us," Karzai said, wagging his forefinger at the audience. "Once again, I want to hear from you. Are you standing with us or not?"

Many in the audience raised their hands and yelled "Yes!" But Karzai received less enthusiastic endorsements from others.

The Afghan official in charge of **local governments**, Ghulam Jilani Popal, said he didn't hear anyone raise serious reservations about the campaign, but acknowledged that some skepticism remains because of the long-standing problems of violence and governance problems.

"In Afghanistan, people first see and then believe," Popal said.

Tor Jan Agha from Arghistan district was not as optimistic.

"This shura today will not have any benefit if they will not give authority to the Kandahar people," he said. "The problem will not be solved by only the mayor. They should give authority to the tribal leaders. There are famous (jihadi) commanders in Kandahar. They should give them authority. Foreign forces cannot bring security."

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, top U.S. and **NATO** commander in Afghanistan, acknowledged the skepticism.

'Naturally skeptical'

"What they have seen in the past is a lack of capacity on the part of the government and a lack of numbers of coalition forces to achieve lasting security," he said. "I think they are naturally skeptical. I think we, together with the Afghan partners, have to show that we can do it and make that stick."

McChrystal, who said that NATO has been asked to help the **Afghan government** fight corruption, has limited time to prove that his counterinsurgency plan will work. While not all of the 30,000 U.S. reinforcements that President Barack Obama deployed to the war have arrived in Afghanistan, he wants to start withdrawing U.S. forces, if conditions allow, in July 2010.

"We think that we have got to show clear, demonstrable by about the end of this year," he said. "I think we can do that."