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Road Bombs Kill Six Afghan Police and Two U.S. Troops

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KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) -- The strategy sits for now on a table in a locked-down Afghan capital: Hand over security in all 34 provinces to the government by the end of 2014 -- more than three years after President Barack Obama's date for the start of an American troop drawdown.

By Tuesday, it will be adopted at a one-day international conference, giving war-weary Americans and Europeans a date for when their involvement in Afghanistan may begin to come to an end. It will also give President Hamid Karzai a chance to show whether his struggling government is making progress toward running the country.

The conference comes at a time of growing anxiety in the U.S. and Europe about the course of the war -- concerns underscored by Taliban attacks on Monday that killed six Afghan police and two American soldiers. A major security operation virtually shut down Kabul for the conference in which some 60 nations will focus on the postwar transition.

Afghan officials want the U.S. and other international donors to give them a greater say in spending the billions of dollars in aid and reconstruction funds that have flowed into the country since the war began in 2001 -- often with only limited results and amid

allegations of corruption and mismanagement that have bolstered the Taliban in the eyes of many ordinary Afghans.

Talk of lofty development goals will take place against the backdrop of rising casualties, especially in the Taliban strongholds of the south and east.

Mindful that public patience is running out, the delegates will endorse the goal of gradually turning over security to Afghan forces by the time Karzai leaves office at the end of 2014, according to a draft communique obtained by The Associated Press.

The Afghan government and the international community are expected to agree on a plan to decide which of the 34 provinces would be ready for Afghan control and when. The communique however makes no mention of international troop levels during the transition period.

If **NATO** follows the model used in Iraq, the coalition will likely keep substantial numbers of troops in Afghanistan through much of the transition to help train Afghan forces and to intervene if the Afghans cannot control security and prevent the Taliban from mounting a comeback in provinces cleared of major insurgent forces.

Although Obama said in December that U.S. troops would begin coming home in July 2011, he did not say how many troops would leave then. Critics complained that the date signaled to the Taliban that all they had to do was hold out until the Americans and their allies were gone.

Vice President **Joe Biden** told ABC's "This Week" on Sunday that the number of U.S. troops leaving Afghanistan "could be as few as a couple of thousand," but was once quoted as saying next July's drawdown would mean "a lot of people moving out."

In London, a senior British diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity because final details of the communique have not yet been finalized, said the conference would likely agree that the process of handing over control to Afghan forces would begin early next year.

The diplomat said a NATO conference in Lisbon in October would decide which areas would be handed over immediately. A conference working paper on security says that during the transition, NATO troops may "remain in the lead in specific districts" of provinces nominally under Afghan control.

Ahead of the conference, representatives of Britain and Afghanistan's neighbor, Pakistan, said some troops may have to remain past 2014 to help train Afghan forces.

"We recognize that there'll be further work to do in terms of training and improving the quality of those forces beyond that, which is why we've said that training forces may be available after that date but we have made it very clear that that will not be combat forces," British Defense Secretary Liam Fox told the British Broadcasting Corp., on Sunday.

Speaking to reporters, Pakistan's foreign minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, expressed skepticism that the Afghans will be ready to take over security by 2014, saying "in my personal assessment, it might take longer."

"But again it depends on how quickly they are able to train their armed forces, their civilian law enforcement agencies, to take on the responsibility of security and protection of the ordinary Afghan citizen," said Qureshi, whose government has longtime ties to insurgents. He said Pakistan was ready to help the Afghans achieve stability "because we feel that a stable, peaceful, prosperous Afghanistan is in Pakistan's interest."

Underscoring the security challenge, bombs killed six Afghan policemen in the biggest southern city of Kandahar and two American troops in the south, Afghan and U.S. officials said. The American deaths brought to 42 the number of U.S. troops killed in Afghanistan this month.

To demonstrate their commitment to good governance, Afghan officials have been working feverishly in recent weeks to prepare action plans with benchmarks for agriculture, reintegrating insurgents back into society and economic and social development.

Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), who is leading the U.S. delegation, told reporters the Kabul conference "is going to show more Afghan ownership and leadership, which is something we've been pushing." She said the U.S. is "pressing the Afghan government at all levels to be more accountable, to go after corruption," but that the U.S. also had a responsibility to improve management of its programs.

The Afghans have long complained that the U.S. and other donors have squandered aid money through hiring overpriced international contractors and pursuing development projects that the country does not need or cannot afford to maintain.

Since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion that toppled the Taliban, 77 percent of the \$29 billion in international aid spent in Afghanistan has been disbursed on projects with little or no input from Afghan government officials, according to the Afghan Ministry of Finance's 2009 donor financial review.

At a January meeting in London, donor nations agreed to have half of development aid delivered through the Afghan government to 50 percent in two years.

On Tuesday, Karzai will ask the international community to restate this commitment and to align at least 80 percent of development and governance assistance over the next two years to a list of more than 20 national priority programs being introduced at the conference. In return, Karzai's government will promise to improve its financial management system, improve collection of taxes and customs revenues and fight corruption.