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The Washington Post

Karzai moves to disband private security firms in Afghanistan

By Joshua Partlow

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KABUL - President Hamid Karzai intends to disband all private security companies in Afghanistan within four months, his spokesman said Monday, a timeline that likely will meet with strong resistance from NATO forces who rely heavily on the companies to provide security to convoys and installations across the country.



The announcement came as a surprise to U.S. military officials who have recently begun a review of their security contracts in an attempt to address the widespread allegations that such guards are unaccountable and that their reckless behavior inflames public sentiment against foreign forces.

Just hours before presidential spokesman Waheed Omer's announcement, the head of the new NATO task force on private security companies, Brig. Gen. Margaret Boor, said, "I'm not sure any of us know what [the] timeline would look like at this point" for dissolving the companies.

After the announcement, U.S. military spokesman in Kabul, Maj. Joel Harper, said, "We are in total support of the president of Afghanistan's intent to do away with private security companies and to do away with the need for private security companies."

But he added, "This should be done in a logical and sequential manner, and as conditions permit."

As the Taliban has spread through Afghanistan, violence has spiked and security has deteriorated. Because of the daily threats of working and traveling in the country, providing private armed guards has become a lucrative industry. They escort NATO supply convoys, guard government buildings and protect those involved in development projects. But they have also developed a reputation as poorly trained, trigger-happy mercenaries acting with little oversight.

The U.S. government employs about 26,000-armed guards, including 19,000 working with the U.S. military, Boor said. The military has contracts with 37 licensed private security companies, of whom just under half are Afghan companies, as well as an unspecified number of non-licensed companies, she said.

"Since the Afghan army and the Afghan police are not quite at the stages of capability and capacity to provide all the security that's needed, private security companies are filling a gap," Boor said. "So what they do is important."

In late June, the U.S. military set up Task Force Spotlight, to "take a hard look" at these private security companies, she said, because when it comes to accountability and oversight, "we had not been doing a good job."

Among the early goals of the task force is to develop a census of all private armed guards under U.S. military contracts to determine who has entered a biometric database and received weapons training.

Karzai is expected to issue a presidential decree later Monday that will outline the process of how the companies are to be disbanded, Omer said.

Ahmed Rateb Popal, an executive at one of the large Afghan security firms, Watan Risk Management, said the federation of private security companies has scheduled a meeting for Monday evening to discuss the new deadline.

"Karzai has changed the deadline and I don't know what he means by that. Is he planning to close all the private security firms or some?" Popal said. "We will call all the representatives tonight and will make a decision and then we will respond."