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Pajhwok

## Karzai trades barbs with US & NATO

By Javed Hamim Kakar

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President Hamid Karzai on Sunday had testy exchanges with ambassadors of several Western countries on the issue of private security companies, saying he would no longer accept foreign dictates.

At a special meeting, President Karzai categorically told foreign envoys his position remained unchanged on the dissolution of private companies which he said had established a parallel government in Afghanistan -- something he would not allow.

A participant confided to Pajhwok Afghan News an angry president, who rejected calls from US and British ambassadors to suspend the decree disbanding security firms until mid-November, stormed out of the meeting.

At the outset, US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry asked the president to spell out his stance in a day or two, the source revealed. The diplomat reportedly wanted to share the presidential view on the subject with key donors and NGOs.

While responding to the envoy's demand, Karzai accused the security companies of involvement in robberies, intimidation of Afghans and assaults on people's dignity. "I'll choose people's dignity over anything else, including reconstruction projects," he was quoted as telling Eikenberry.

The president sought a list of reconstruction schemes that needed special security arrangements from private firms. But International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Commander Gen. David Petraeus refused to provide such details, the official added.

His refusal irked the president, who blasted foreigners for doing clandestine things in Afghanistan. Karzai told the diplomats he would resist "economic blackmail and political warnings" and was determined to bring transparency to all projects across the country, the source disclosed.

Ambassadors Karl Eikenberry (US), William Patey (UK), Ambassador Rüdiger König (Germany), ISAF Commander Gen. David Petraeus and NATO's special civilian representative, Mark Sidwell, were among the foreign officials who attended the meeting.

Karzai has issued a four-month deadline for dissolving all foreign and Afghan security companies, a move he believes will help stabilise Afghanistan.

"I addressed the problem five years ago but our international friends warned of halting development projects," Karzai was quoted in a statement issued from the Presidential Palace in Kabul.

"I again raised the issue three years ago and international community representatives asked for an additional two years. But now the Afghan government is determined to dissolve the companies," Karzai told the foreign envoys.

Japan's deputy ambassador also took part in the meeting. After the meeting became tense, he reportedly handed the president a list of the reconstruction schemes his country had executed in Afghanistan.

The president told his interlocutors to convey their security concerns about the implementation of projects to the government. Karzai would continue to meet foreign officials who expressed concerns over the presidential decree banning the security firms, the statement added.