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Reuters

Afghan Taliban says will target national assembly

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The Afghan Taliban will hunt down and punish anyone who takes part in next month's national assembly, where the possibility of long-term U.S. military bases in Afghanistan will be discussed, the group warned in a statement on Wednesday.

The unusually specific threat, in an English-language message from spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, said participants will be pursued "all over the country and will face severe repercussions."

It called on Taliban supporters "to target every security guard, person with intention, participant and every caller of this convention."

The four-day gathering, known in Afghanistan as a 'Loya Jirga', will be held in the capital Kabul in late November, where it will bring together more than 2,000 politicians, tribal elders, community leaders, businessmen and civil society representatives from across the country.

The assembly will be a consultative process, and its decisions are not legally binding on the government.

Earlier this month, Taliban vowed to fight until all foreign forces have left Afghanistan.

President Hamid Karzai and his Western backers have agreed that all foreign combat troops would return home by the end of 2014, but the West has promised continued support beyond then in the form of funds and training for Afghan security forces.

Despite the presence of tens of thousands of Western soldiers in Afghanistan, the United Nations and other groups say violence is at its worst since U.S.-led Afghan forces toppled the Taliban from power in late 2001.

NATO-led forces say they have seen a decline over recent months in attacks launched by insurgents against their troops.

Safia Sediqi, a spokeswoman for the grand assembly, said she was unaware of the threat.

"I have not read the statement yet and it's early to comment about it," she said.