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## Afghanistan: culture of corruption

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President Hamid Karzai promised to stamp out corruption. The image suggested otherwise. Standing at Karzai's side Tuesday were his two vice presidents - both former warlords widely believed to have looted Afghanistan for years.

Reform is a tall order in a country awash in drug money. Afghans pay bribes for everything from driver's licenses to police protection, and the elite all too often treat state property as their own.

"Right now, 85 percent of the government is corrupt," said Ahmed Shah Lumar, a businessman in the southern city of Kandahar. He said bribery, extortion and other corrupt practices extend "from the very small person" in government to the very top.

International pressure is mounting on Karzai to make clean government a top priority as he begins his second term after an election marred by fraud. President Obama wants concrete steps, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said Tuesday.

Gibbs told reporters that the U.S. Embassy in Kabul was working with the Afghans on an anti-corruption compact, but he refused to comment on specific benchmarks or deadlines.

"We're going to look for President Karzai to move boldly and forcefully to initiate internal reforms," State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said. "And we stand ready to assist him in

that regard, to help him improve governance in Afghanistan, to provide security for the Afghan people and provide the kind of services that the people of Afghanistan deserve."

In Kabul, Karzai acknowledged to reporters that Afghanistan "has a bad name from corruption." He added, using a local expression, that "we will do our best through all possible means to eliminate this dark stain from our clothes."

Karzai said corruption could not be erased simply by replacing certain officials. Instead, "we need to review the law, where we have problems," he said. One issue regarding the law has been a failure to define bribery and other such practices.

The president also promised to strengthen a government commission established a year ago to fight corruption.

"We ought to be skeptical about promises from Karzai with respect to corruption," said Mark Moyar, professor of national security affairs at U.S. Marine Corps University in Quantico, Va. "He has promised to stamp out corruption on many previous occasions, in response to pressure from Afghanistan's foreign patrons, and has consistently failed to deliver."

Even with a good faith effort, corruption is so deeply entrenched in Afghan society that it could take decades to clean up.

A March report by the U.S. Agency for International Development found that corruption had reached "an unprecedented scope in the country's history."

Corruption is not limited to the rich and powerful. It is woven into the very fabric of everyday Afghan life.

Villagers in the southern province of Helmand say police routinely stop them on the highways and demand money just to pass. In the capital, Kabul, government employees shake down people applying for driver's licenses, passports or building permits.