



Karzai to discuss future relations

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WASHINGTON -- Afghan President Hamid Karzai's U.S. visit comes as the two countries formulate bilateral relations for the post-U.S. troops era beyond 2014.

Prior to leaving for Washington Monday, Karzai met with a visiting U.S. Senate delegation in Kabul during the weekend to discuss issues, including the security pact between the two countries, the peace process in Afghanistan and the future relationship his country will have with the United States, the Voice of America reported. The Senate delegation was headed by Sen. Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The United States currently has about 60,000 troops in Afghanistan, but it is yet to be decide how many U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan under the security pact after 2014.

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said the "full range of issues" are expected to come up during Karzai's Washington visit this week, including "the issues of security, issues of political transition -- as you know, there are elections scheduled in 2014 in Afghanistan -- U.S. ongoing economic support, our Silk-Road strategy, our regional-integration strategy."

The Taliban have said there would be a prolonged war in Afghanistan if any foreign troops remain in the country beyond 2014.

Khaama Press quoted a Taliban statement Saturday as saying: "If American wants to leave a small or large number of its troops for whatever length of time then it means war and destruction will continue in the region for that same length."

Cato Institute analyst Malou Innocent told the Voice of America Barack Obama, during his second term as U.S. president, should begin working "with the Taliban to sort of incorporate them within the government, accepting the realities on the ground and understanding that the Taliban with their local lay of the land, their understanding of the human terrain, their cross-border sanctuaries that they have in Pakistan, understanding and coming to reconcile our interests and our limited ability to change that situation."

Afghanistan already has secured the release of some Taliban prisoners from Pakistan, which is seen as key to any peace effort and to encourage other Taliban members to negotiate with the Karzai government.

The United States has said it is supportive of the dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan that will lead to reconciliation.

On New Year's Day while discussing Karzai's U.S. visit, spokesman Aimal Faizi praised the release of the Taliban prisoners and said the Afghan government hoped the remaining Taliban prisoners in Pakistan would also be released to promote the peace process.

In an editorial Monday, The New York Times said Obama's talks with Karzai would be an "important marker" in the critical choices to be made on Afghanistan.

The editorial said while the Afghan security forces have taken responsibility to secure more of their country, the Pentagon has said only 1-of-23 NATO-trained brigades can operate without American assistance.

"The recent alarming rise in fatal attacks by Afghan forces on their American military mentors has crushed whatever was left of America's appetite for the costly conflict," the editorial said, adding the United States has spent \$39 billion to train and equip the Afghan security forces over a decade.

On Obama's plans to keep a residual military force for an indefinite period beyond 2014, the editorial said he needs to think carefully about what its mission would be and make his case to the public. It went on to say the United States cannot go forward if Afghanistan opposes a residual force or puts undue restrictions on those troops.

"Mr. Karzai, a deeply flawed leader who is expected to leave office next year, has his own agenda, which includes requests for updated American aircraft, surveillance equipment and longer-range artillery to modernize his army," the editorial said. "Those requests cannot be taken seriously when Afghan security forces are increasingly murdering Americans and the Afghan government remains so profoundly corrupt."