

The World; Karzai Hints at Permanent U.S. Military Basing; During a Rumsfeld visit, the Afghan president says the people want long-term ties with America. But some are critical of strategy.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

In a news conference with Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in Kabul, the capital, [Hamid Karzai] said Afghan citizens wanted a long-term relationship with the United States.

U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan in late 2001 to oust the Taliban regime and hunt for Al Qaeda terrorists. There are now about 20,000 U.S. troops in the country, and their main mission is to search for militants, particularly in the southeast. They operate out of Bagram air base near Kabul and another facility in the southern province of Kandahar. The U.S. also has access to bases in neighboring Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

IN TALKS: Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, left, refused to say whether the U.S. wanted permanent bases, but President Hamid Karzai said his country sought "a strategic security relationship."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Shah Marai AFP/Getty Images; IN TALKS: Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, left, refused to say whether the U.S. wanted permanent bases, but President Hamid Karzai said his country sought "a strategic security relationship."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Gerald Herbert Associated Press

FULL TEXT

Despite growing concern here about the United States' influence in Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai called Wednesday for a tighter bond between the two nations and possibly a permanent U.S. military presence.

In a news conference with Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in Kabul, the capital, Karzai said Afghan citizens wanted a long-term relationship with the United States.

"They want this relationship to be a sustained economic and political relationship and, most importantly of all, a strategic security relationship to enable Afghanistan to defend itself, to continue to prosper, to stop the possibility of interferences in Afghanistan," he said.

Karzai said he had discussed the matter with President Bush but was now planning to formalize the request, though he did not say when.

Rumsfeld refused to say whether the U.S. wanted permanent American military bases in Afghanistan but said the final decision would come from the White House.

"What we generally do when we work with another country is what we have been doing. We find ways we can be helpful, maybe training, equipment or other types of assistance," Rumsfeld said. "We think in terms of what we are doing rather than the question of military bases and that type thing."

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Although many Afghans warmly received the Americans at first, perceptions of the U.S. military have been changing.

Once optimistic about U.S. efforts to bring peace to the country, some Afghans blame current power struggles between warlords and the central government on poor strategy by the American military.

"We were very happy with the Americans at first -- they got rid of the Taliban government with the help of the local commanders. But now these commanders are terrorizing the people," said Akbar Hanif, a shopkeeper in the northern province of Kunduz.

Lt. Cindy Moore, a U.S. military spokeswoman, said later: "Prior to the democratically elected government, there were more challenges. The hope of the U.S. military was to support local officials that represented the people."

Political analysts say the U.S. military must distance itself from local warlords if it wants ordinary Afghans' support.

"If the Americans truly want to help rebuild Afghanistan, they must stop cooperating with the local warlords who are undermining the central government," said Kabir Ranjbar, a professor of law at Kabul University.

Ranjbar said a long-term security guarantee from the U.S. could keep other neighboring countries, particularly Iran and Pakistan, from meddling in Afghanistan's affairs.

But other observers note that through stronger military ties with Afghanistan, the U.S. may be seeking to strengthen its own position in the region to counter increasingly warm relations among India, China and Russia.

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: IN TALKS: Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, left, refused to say whether the U.S. wanted permanent bases, but President Hamid Karzai said his country sought "a strategic security relationship."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Shah Marai AFP/Getty Images; PHOTO: IN TALKS: Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, left, refused to say whether the U.S. wanted permanent bases, but President Hamid Karzai said his country sought "a strategic security relationship."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Gerald Herbert Associated Press

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