

Afghan Leader Challenges Warlords --- President's Efforts To Tame Factionalism Are Hindered By Shortage Of Foreign Aid

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By Ahmed Rashid

Afghan President Hamid Karzai is making an aggressive push to tame the country's divisive warlordism and build an ethnically balanced, professional army. But uncertainty about the arrival of foreign aid is hampering his efforts.

After a long and heated cabinet meeting Monday, Mr. Karzai announced the creation of a special commission to demobilize warlord militias and speed creation of a national army encompassing ethnic groups long at odds with each other. "There will be discussions with each warlord," says Vice President Hedayat Arsala. Given the cabinet's decision and renewed pressure from Western powers, he added, "now it will be difficult for them to say no."

Mr. Karzai's aides say the cabinet also decided that warlords would no longer be allowed to remain as governors of provinces, and that the central government would seek the ouster of regional military commanders and police chiefs who represent warlords rather than the government. Mr. Karzai has again asked the country's two most powerful warlords -- the governor of Herat province, Ismail Khan, and Uzbek Gen. Rashid Dostum -- to leave their fiefs and join the Kabul government as "elder statesmen." It is unclear how Mr. Karzai's government would enforce its demands. Messrs. Khan and Dostum rejected such requests last month.

In another significant step, the cabinet ordered Defense Minister Mohammed Fahim to appoint an army officer corps that is more ethnically balanced than the present Tajik-dominated corps. Mr. Fahim, himself a Tajik, heads the Northern Alliance army that ousted the Taliban regime last year and remains the country's biggest military force. Some 90 of his 100 generals are Panjshiri Tajiks, so named for the Panjshir Valley from which they hail.

Panjshiris have long dominated the army, police and intelligence services, causing widespread resentment, especially among the majority Pashtun ethnic group. Critics of Mr. Karzai, himself a Pashtun, consider him a political hostage of the Panjshiris.

U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who visited Kabul on Monday and then flew to Mazar-e-Sharif to meet with Gen. Dostum, expressed support for the measures, noting that factional violence in the north of the country is hindering aid deliveries. "This is a make-or-break time for the government, and with or without money Karzai appears to be determined to become assertive," says a Western diplomat.

Still, demobilizing Afghanistan's warlord armies would be easier if there were alternative employment for their roughly 100,000 soldiers -- one reason Mr. Karzai wants to begin rebuilding efforts. But a crucial meeting of the 15-nation Afghanistan Support Group in Geneva on July 11 has made it clear that little if any reconstruction funding will reach the country until April, far later than the government had hoped. "At one level there is a kind of donor fatigue; at another there are concerns about security in the country, and at another level government bureaucracies are very slow," said a Western diplomat at the conference.

Meanwhile, United Nations agencies are struggling from critical shortfalls in relief funds that they fear will invite instability in the countryside. The U.N. High Commission for Refugees says it needs an additional \$60 million during the next three months to deal with the huge influx of returnees. UNHCR representative Filippo Grandi says nearly 1.2 million refugees have arrived from Pakistan since December -- three times more than agency had expected -- and 100,000 have returned from Iran. The World Food Program is short of funds needed to build up wheat stocks for the drought-and famine-hit west and north.

"Failure to invest in Afghanistan at this critical juncture could help to fulfill our worst fears for the integrity, economic development and unity of Afghanistan," Nigel Fisher, the U.N. deputy Special Representative to

Afghanistan, told the Geneva conference.

U.N. officials say there is a shortfall of \$398 million needed for priority relief programs in the current quarter alone. Also, the government doesn't have enough money to pay salaries, although the World Bank has approved \$90 million in credits that will help Kabul meet its immediate running costs.

U.S. Afghanistan Coordinator David Johnson says the Bush administration has asked Congress for \$250 million over and above the \$450 million it has allocated this year for Afghanistan. "I don't think we have an infinite window of opportunity to work in, and we are taking steps to shorten the amount of time" needed to deliver aid, Mr. Johnson told reporters after the Geneva conference. U.S. aid so far has gone for relief rather than reconstruction, and new U.S. funds are expected to go toward building a new Afghan army.

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