

Karzai Risks All To Confront The Militia Generals

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By Ahmed Rashid in Kabul

A troubled year after taking office, President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan insists that he is finally taking the risky but necessary steps to confront the warlords in the provinces to allow much-needed reconstruction to begin in the spring.

Mr Karzai told The Telegraph: "The warlords know that they cannot survive without the centre [central government] and they are not strong enough to challenge the centre - there may be acts of defiance but no challenge.

"We call the shots, they [the warlords] don't call the shots but there is a huge disconnect between the central government authority and the lack of an administration - we need to fill that gap very quickly and I need good, trained people."

An assassin tried to kill Mr Karzai in Kandahar in September. Recently several Arab and Afghan al-Qa'eda suicide bombers, with explosives strapped to their waists, were arrested in Kabul.

Now heavily armed American and Afghan bodyguards, with biceps like lorry tyres, protect him round the clock. In the next few weeks he is going to need more of them, as he pushes through plans to start demobilizing warlords' armies.

So far this month Mr Karzai has dismissed 29 corrupt officials in the provinces. He has also passed a decree that forces warlords to have either a political or military role in the provinces - not both - while another decree orders that disarming and demobilizing the warlords' armies should be completed by June next year.

So far the results have been mixed. Some 10 officials have refused to resign. In the northern province of Kunduz Gen Mohammed Daud has already collected 6,000 weapons but in the south the powerful warlord Gen Ismail Khan has refused to disarm his troops.

Some warlords have accepted Mr Karzai's order to choose a political or military role. Others pretend not to have heard about the decree. He said: "The bottom line is that nobody has the power to reject government orders but some work according to Afghan time."

After he was elected president of the transitional government in June by the loya jirga, Mr Karzai was criticised for declining to use his newly established legitimacy to act decisively against the warlords but now he is responding to popular demand.

He said: "Politically speaking, the people are way ahead of us. People are looking at the centre to give them a change for the better, not the warlords."

Mr Karzai has also done some blunt talking to the Americans, insisting that they must distance themselves from the warlords, many of whom were supported by US forces, money and supplies during the war against the Taliban.

The key to dealing with the warlords will be in building a new army. The problem so far has been the other power centre in Kabul - the Defence Ministry - run by the Tajik faction from the Panjshir valley north of Kabul led by Gen Mohammed Fahim.

Gen Fahim has procrastinated over how to build a national army, in which America has the lead role, and over demobilising his own army, the largest in the country. Without these steps other warlords will refuse to disarm. He now insists that he is working with Mr Karzai.

Mr Karzai said that by March the rebuilding of 2,400 miles of roads will start and £200 million will be pumped into aid programmes for rural areas, which will put added pressure on the warlords.