

## Karzai Calls In The Tribes In Bid To Oust Taliban

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By Ahmed Rashid in Kabul

The first thing you notice when you enter the Presidential palace in Kabul is that the Americans are missing.

For the past five years President Hamid Karzai has been guarded by rude, scruffy, heavily built American male and female Rambo-style bodyguards. They treated everyone with contempt.

Now much to the relief of tribal elders, there are different guards for the president: young Afghans in sharp suits and ties, but with machine guns slung across their shoulders.

They are everywhere — on the roofs when Mr Karzai takes an evening walk and in the garden at dawn when he goes to the mosque for the first prayers during the month of Ramadan.

They stood to attention when the Princess Royal, on a visit from Britain, drove into the palace to pay a secret midnight call to Mr Karzai and his wife last week, just as I was walking out.

Although trained by the same rude Americans, the Afghan guards are excessively polite, especially to tribal elders.

Mr Karzai will need them when he embarks on a tour of the Pashtun tribal areas along the border with Pakistan, to meet the elders to muster support for his latest proposal to end the Taliban insurgency.

The president wants to hold a massive Jirga, or meeting, of elders of the tribes that inhabits both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border by December. His aim is to end Taliban violence, the spread of extremism and to persuade Pakistan's military regime to stop supporting the Taliban.

"I am thinking of a meeting between Afghan civil society, Afghan elders, tribal chiefs — from the Pakistan side I am hoping for the same thing," said the president.

"It should be a gathering of the people from one end of the Afghan border with Pakistan to the other end.

"For 30 years there has been a systematic campaign of bringing in the most radical elements by force or money and with support from outside. . . to weaken civil society. The same thing has happened on the Pakistani side. The traditional secular Pashtun leadership of Pakistan has been undermined systematically and violently."

Mr Karzai said the two countries would set up a joint commission to oversee the procedures of the Jirga and would be eligible to sit on it, while the international community should help monitor it.

Western diplomats in Kabul said they might support the Jirga, but would not become involved in any monitoring.

Mr Karzai's plan is to persuade the Jirga to denounce Taliban and al Qaeda-inspired violence and through tribal fiat, force them to disarm. He said both he and President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan would attend the two Jirgas — one in each country.

However, the measure is fraught with political problems and many Afghans are sceptical, not least because they suspect that Pakistan's intelligence services would stuff its Jirga with Pakistani Taliban and other extremists who could declare "jihad" against Mr Karzai.

Several cabinet ministers oppose the idea, as do parliamentarians, who believe that such a Jirga would supersede the authority of parliament. Mr Karzai hopes that if Pakistan is transparent about the Jirga, it could usher in a new era of peace between the countries.

"A Jirga means representative and those not representative cannot be there or called to attend," he said. "I hope there will be similar transparency on the Pakistani side."

It is a long shot but Mr Karzai is desperate, as are most Afghans, to end the violence.