

Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai asks US to sanction Pakistani military

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Kabul: Afghanistan's former president lashed out at both the United States and Pakistan on Wednesday, accusing them of using the Afghan war to further their own interests and calling on Washington to sanction Pakistani military and intelligence officials.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Hamid Karzai said his country is in "a terrible shape," 16 years after the U.S.-led invasion that toppled the Taliban. Karzai became president shortly after the fall of the Taliban and held office until 2014.

In recent weeks, Kabul has been battered by a wave of attacks claimed alternately by the Taliban and a rival Islamic State affiliate, which killed scores of people and brutally exposed the U.S.-backed government's failure to secure the capital.

"The U.S. cannot tell us 'well if I am not here, you will be worse off.' We are in a terrible shape right now. . . . We want to be better. We want to have peace. We want to have security," Karzai said.

There are now as many as 16,000 U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and a special training unit is scheduled to deploy early this year. After the U.S. and NATO forces formally concluded their combat mission at the end of 2014 and shifted to a training role, the Taliban stepped up their attacks and an affiliate of the Islamic State group emerged in Afghanistan.

That same year, Karzai's second and final term in office ended.

By then, his relationship with the United States deteriorated to the extent that he refused to sign a bilateral security agreement with Washington, leaving it to his successor, Ashraf Ghani to do so.

Today, Afghanistan's National Unity Government, paralyzed by bickering and feuding, shares power between Ghani and his Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. The power-sharing deal was brokered by then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

Karzai called it an American creation and said it "undermined Afghan democracy and the Afghan constitution."

In the early years of Karzai's administration, which was harshly criticized as corrupt, oversight of the war was non-existent and commanders allied to the U.S.-led coalition often steered their American partners toward attacks against their own enemies in an effort to settle old scores, rather than build their nation.

In the interview, Karzai did not hide his frustration. He believes Washington wants to establish permanent bases in Afghanistan solely to project power in the region, while Pakistan wants to turn Afghanistan into a client state.

He said U.S. forces are not in Afghanistan "to stop extremism."

“In my view, their intention is to keep us divided and weak so they can carry on their objectives in this region,” Karzai said. “They have their global politics and rivalries. They have China as a great rising power. They have Russia as a revitalized, re-energized great power on the world scene and they feel threatened and challenged.”

Echoing complaints from Afghanistan’s current government, Karzai also accused neighboring Pakistan of harboring Taliban militants. He called on the United States to sanction Pakistani military and intelligence officials.

“We hope the U.S. will now act in Pakistan,” he said but added that “does not” mean that the Pakistan people should be hurt or that war should be launched in Pakistan.”

President Donald Trump has ramped up pressure on Pakistan since the start of the year, suspending up to \$2 billion in military aid to Islamabad after accusing it of failing to crack down on militants who launch cross-border attacks on U.S. and Afghan forces.

Pakistan denies such allegations, blaming the violence on the Kabul government’s failure to secure the country.

Karzai’s interview with the AP came a day after U.S. lawmakers questioned the direction of America’s longest war. At a hearing on Tuesday, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee noted that Washington is spending roughly \$45 billion a year in Afghanistan, with the vast majority of the funds going to security. Just \$780 million goes toward economic aid.

As Afghanistan’s war lingers on, public opinion, which has always been critical of Pakistan, has increasingly turned against the United States, the presence of foreigners in the country, and the Kabul government, which is perceived as corrupt and incompetent.

In Kabul’s Kot-e-Sangi neighborhood on the western edge of the city day laborers gather by the hundreds at dawn in the subzero temperatures, hoping for work.

Mohammed Daoud comes every day for the 300 Afghanis “roughly \$4” that he sometimes earns. Deteriorating security in the Afghan capital has meant less work and he blames both the government and also the U.S.-led coalition.

“The government looks after only itself and what are the foreign soldiers doing? Nothing,” he said.

Karzai said Afghans have to retake their country.

“We must implement our constitution and we must do all we can as a people to restore ourselves to the ownership of this country, which we don’t have right now,” he said. “Right now it is the U.S. policy that owns it.”

- AP