

Afghan president welcomes U.S. troops withdrawal - Tehran Times

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KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Afghan government on Wednesday welcomed President Barack Obama's decision to bring home half of the 66,000 American troops in Afghanistan within the next year, and said its forces are ready to take responsibility for the country's security.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has been pressing for a faster pace in the withdrawal of foreign combat troops from Afghanistan and agreed with Obama last month to accelerate the handover of security responsibilities to his country's newly trained security forces to this spring — instead of late summer as originally planned.

“Afghanistan welcomes the announcement by President Obama,” Karzai's office said. “This is something Afghanistan has wanted for so long now. The withdrawal in spring of foreign forces from Afghan villages will definitely help in ensuring peace and full security in Afghanistan.”

The Afghan Defense Ministry said it was ready to take on the responsibility. “We are ready to fill the vacuum and we are ready to take full responsibility for security in 2013,” ministry spokesman Mohammad Zahir Azimi told The Associated Press.

Many Afghans, however, worry that a quick drawdown will destabilize a country that is still fighting a war with insurgents more than 11 years after the U.S. invasion. They also fear that the nearly 352,000 strong Afghan army and police forces are not ready to take the lead for security.

Although the drawdown was widely expected, the announcement for the first time put numbers on the withdrawal plan and for many Afghans brought home the fact that foreign troops are indeed leaving.

Obama said Tuesday in his State of the Union address that the first 34,000 troops will leave within a year and more in 2014, when all foreign combat forces are to leave the country. But he did not reveal what U.S. military presence would remain after 2014 to help advise and train the Afghan forces.

That may stem from the lack of an agreement so far on a bilateral security deal between the United States and Afghanistan that would regulate the status of those forces, including the contentious issue of immunity from prosecution under Afghan laws. If no agreement is struck, the U.S. will not retain any forces in Afghanistan after 2014, just as Washington pulled all of its troops out of Iraq at the end of 2011. No other NATO forces are expected to remain either if the Afghans don't strike a deal with the Americans.

The U.S.-led NATO coalition has about 100,000 troops in Afghanistan, including the 66,000 Americans. Many countries are also expected to accelerate their own withdrawals. Britain, which has 9,000 troops here, is expected to drop to 5,200 by the end of the year —

although they and the U.S. troops are expected to start the main withdrawals after the summer fighting season. Before making the announcement, Obama had briefed Karzai in a video conference.

Karzai's office said the two leaders discussed the pending security agreement, strengthening and equipping the Afghan forces, and the pullout of U.S. forces. "This drawdown will continue. And by the end of next year, our war in Afghanistan will be over," Obama said, adding that Al-Qaeda was no longer the threat it was on Sept. 11, 2001. The U.S. invaded less than a month later to overthrow the Taliban.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid also welcomed the drawdown, but said it wasn't enough. The coalition, he said, should leave immediately. "The Western governments must realize that their baseless war in Afghanistan had no benefit for them," Mujahid said in a statement. "Thousands of their soldiers were killed, disabled or faced psychological problems. Billions of dollars were spent, which affected their economies. Their people are faced with poverty and other problems. Now it is time for America and all other countries to put an end to this baseless war in Afghanistan and withdraw their troops."