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US senators warn Karzai over 'security' deal

1/3/2014

A group of US lawmakers have held a meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, warning him against refusal to sign the so-called Bilateral Security Agreement with Washington.

The group - including Arizona and South Carolina Republicans John McCain and Lindsey Graham - said after the Thursday meeting that they expect the accord to be signed soon.

“As a result of our long meeting with President Karzai we have narrowed those differences and I believe we can look forward to signing the Bilateral Security Agreement... sooner rather than later,” McCain told reporters in Kabul.

The American lawmakers said that if the security deal was not signed, it would pose a threat to the country and the region.

The agreement would allow the presence of US troops in Afghanistan beyond the 2014 withdrawal deadline. Without a signed deal, all US and NATO forces would have to pull out from Afghanistan.

Washington wanted the agreement signed by December 31, 2013, saying it needs time to get ready to keep thousands of troops in Afghanistan. NATO allies have said they will not remain if the Americans withdraw.

However, President Karzai has said that he would not be intimidated by the US or pressured into signing the deal and that the matter should be left to the next government after the April elections in Afghanistan.

He has also stated that Kabul could not approve an agreement without guarantees that the US would halt its deadly airstrikes on residential areas of Afghanistan and help broker a peace process with the Taliban.

Meanwhile, the American lawmakers called on Karzai to halt the release of 88 inmates from Bagram prison, north of Kabul. Afghanistan plans to free hundreds of inmates from the prison, which was handed over from US control after a deal in March.

Washington claims the prisoners are a serious threat to security, but Kabul says there is not enough evidence to keep them in jail.