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Reuters

Afghanistan, U.S. Sign Prison Transfer Deal

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KABUL - The United States and Afghanistan signed a deal on Friday on the transfer of a major U.S.-run detention center to Afghan authorities, improving the prospects of a strategic partnership allowing long-term American involvement in the country. The Strategic Partnership Agreement, which Washington and Kabul have been discussing for over a year, will be the framework for U.S. involvement in Afghanistan beyond 2014, when the last foreign combat troops are due to leave Afghanistan.

Afghan Defense Minister Gen. Abdul Rahim Wardak, who signed the deal to hand over the prison at Bagram airbase, said an Afghan commander would soon be appointed to take charge of the facility. The transfer would be completed in about six months.

"The signing of this memorandum is an important step forward in our Strategic Partnership negotiations," said General John Allen, commander of the United States forces in Afghanistan, at the ceremony.
"It is yet another example of the progress of transition, and our efforts to ensure that Afghanistan can never again be a safe haven for terrorists."

Ties between Washington and Kabul have been heavily strained for weeks after large numbers of copies of the Koran, the Muslim holy book, were burned at Bagram by U.S. soldiers in what NATO called a tragic blunder.

Widespread protests erupted in which 30 people were killed. Afghan forces turned their weapons on U.S. soldiers, killing six.

PRECONDITIONS

As well as a timeline to take control of detention centers, Afghanistan wants the United States and NATO to agree to stop carrying out night raids on Afghan homes, as preconditions for signing an agreement with Washington.

In January, an Afghan government commission investigating abuse accusations at Bagram -- the largest U.S. jail -- said inmates had reported being tortured and held without evidence. However, the commission said it had found no evidence of torture on the detainees' bodies.

The findings came just days after President Hamid Karzai called for the facility to be handed over to Afghan control.

The decision to transfer prisoners appeared to have lifted the spirits of some Afghans, who say Western soldiers often fail to grasp their country's religious and cultural sensitivities.

"The Afghan army and police are capable of taking control of Afghan prisoners who are in foreign detention," said Kabul resident Feda Mohammad, 58. "This is something that Afghanistan needs to take charge of not America or any other foreign country."

A senior Afghan official said earlier this week that the transfer of the Bagram detention centre would be a first step to handing over all U.S.-managed prisons.

The Obama administration has been hoping it can conclude a partnership agreement before a meeting of NATO leaders in Chicago in May.

While the document is unlikely to specify details, it is expected to contain an agreement in principle to some sort of long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Failure to broker a deal might hurt U.S.-Afghan relations and increase the chances of prolonged turmoil in Afghanistan, one of the world's most unstable countries.

While Afghan officials say the country's security forces have made advances, they still rely heavily on Western firepower and intelligence in the fight against the Taliban. Attacks by Afghan forces on NATO soldiers have cast further doubt on their ability to defeat the

militant movement, which has proven resilient and innovative since being toppled after a U.S. invasion in 2001. (Reuters)