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Ahmadinejad tirade on Afghanistan prompts US walkout

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A US delegation walked out of a conference in Tajikistan Monday during a speech by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad lambasting US policy on Afghanistan as the source of all the nation's troubles.

Ahmadinejad launched his new tirade against Washington at the meeting in the Tajik capital Dushanbe attended by leaders of Afghanistan's neighbours as well as a US delegation led by Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake.

"The cause of all the ills in Afghanistan is the presence on Afghan soil of NATO forces and above all those of the United States," the Iranian president told the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA).

As the firebrand Iranian president was giving his speech, Blake pointedly led the US delegation out of the conference hall. Once his address was over, the delegation returned to listen to other speakers.

Encounters -- even at multinational regional conferences -- between the United States and Iran are extremely rare.

The two countries cut diplomatic relations in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and ties have remained severed ever since. Tensions are rising again over Iran's nuclear programme and Washington has never ruled out military action.

Ahmadinejad, whose country shares a huge border with Afghanistan, said that US forces had gone into the country with the aim of encircling the whole strategic region from Russia to south Asia.

"They went into Afghanistan using the pretext of the fight against terror and now under the same slogan they are surrounding Russia, India and China," Ahmadinejad said.

Iran's president repeated his doubts on the September 11, 2001 terror attacks against the United States, which he described as "enigmatic". The attacks -- claimed by Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden -- prompted the United States to invade Taliban-led Afghanistan.

Using his trademark populist rhetoric, Ahmadinejad declared that "the times of imperialism have long since passed" and in reference to the West said that "those who do not learn from the mistakes of history will be punished".

He called on foreign troops to leave Afghanistan "in the shortest time" and said there was "no doubt that the world needs a new order".

Ahmadinejad said that rather than keeping forces in Afghanistan, NATO should hand over to the Afghan government either 25 percent of its annual expenditure in the country or five percent of its member states' annual military budgets.

"I am sure that the peoples of NATO members will prefer this to interference in Afghanistan's affairs."

Referring to the killing of 17 Afghan villagers earlier this month by a US soldier, Ahmadinejad said: "Afghan women and children were subjected to an attack in their own home. What were they guilty of?"

The conference -- which is also being attended by Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his Pakistani counterpart Asif Ali Zardari -- is the fifth such meeting since 2005 and aims to boost cooperation in rebuilding Afghanistan.

Karzai said that Afghanistan had worked out a national development strategy and had opened up its markets but complained that previous conferences had been long on words and short on actions.

"Many decisions were taken at previous conferences but most of them remained just decisions and were not realised. The time has come to move from words to action in the name of the stability of Afghanistan," he said.