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The Frontier Post

General to run Bagram prison, assert control

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Afghanistan named a three star general to take over Bagram prison from the U.S. military and with him, final say over which prisoners are released, an issue with the potential to open another rift in relations between Washington and Kabul.

The issue of the release of any of the 3,200 people held in the prison at the sprawling American base, north of Kabul, is sensitive to both countries as Afghanistan assumes full security responsibilities ahead of departure of most NATO combat forces in 2014.

Washington fears the prisoners, most of whom it says are mid to high level members of the Taliban, might return to the battlefield as has happened in the past, citing the case of a Taliban commander transferred from Guantanamo Bay to Afghan custody in 2007 who ended up fighting coalition forces again.

They (the United States) can have a consultative role, but not a veto, said Aimal Faizi, chief spokesman of President Hamid Karzai.

What is the point of the transfer if we do not have full control, he said, in remarks that have become increasingly assertive following a string of incidents that have strained US-Afghan ties, notably the killing of 17 villagers blamed on a U.S. soldier and the burning of Qurans at the Bagram base.

Afghan General Ghulam Farooq Barekzai - formerly in charge of policy at the defense ministry - has been named to take over the Bagram detention centre, a palace statement on Saturday said. It was the first step toward handing over control of the prison to Afghan authorities and another move to transferring complete security responsibility to the volatile country before the planned pullout of most Western forces.

Afghanistan, which has long sought control of Bagram prison, says no sovereign country can allow thousands of its people to be held indefinitely under foreign guard and that it alone has the powers to determine what to do with them.

The two sides reached an agreement in March to shift the prison to Afghan control after months of wrangling and a key element of the pact was that Afghanistan would consult with the United States before freeing any of the men incarcerated there.