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Few convinced by Karzai's promise to curb corruption

By Hafizullah Gardesh and Mina Habib

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Soon before departing for a donors' conference in Tokyo, Afghan President Hamid Karzai appeared before parliament and acknowledged that corruption in the country had reached an "extreme level."

He vowed to tackle the problem and asked Afghan lawmakers and members of the international community for their help.

Members of the international community, however, appear skeptical of the president's commitment. While agreeing to provide \$16 billion over the next four years, donor nations for the first time made it a condition that the Afghan government reduce corruption before receiving all of the money. Up to 20 percent of the money could be withheld unless Kabul institutes stronger anti-corruption measures and advances policies to establish the rule of law.

Critics of Karzai at home also wonder whether he'll follow through on his latest promise to combat corruption. They note that while the president has repeatedly promised to improve governance and transparency, progress has been limited during his tenure.

Despite the billions of dollars in international aid that have poured into Afghanistan since the U.S.-led invasion of October 2001, public confidence in the authorities has been undermined by weak government and rampant corruption, while war has continued to hamper reconstruction efforts.

Afghanistan remains the world's biggest producer of opium and its derivative, heroin, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. In Transparency International's latest Corruption Perceptions Index, Afghanistan came in just behind North Korea and Somalia as the most corrupt nation in the world.

Afghans who had high hopes in advance of the president's address came away disappointed.

Sayed Hussein Fazel Sancharaki, a spokesman for the National Coalition, an opposition bloc in parliament, said that as soon as the president began to speak, it became clear that "he had nothing to tell the poor nation."

With all three branches of the government in attendance, Jawid Kohistani, a political analyst in Kabul, said he had expected to hear a detailed roadmap for Afghanistan's future once international forces withdraw at the end of 2014, as well as announcements of major steps to tackle corruption and improve governance.

"Unfortunately, he said nothing but the same sentimental, irrelevant remarks," Kohistani said. "I was really very disappointed."

Shukria Barakzai, a member of parliament representing Kabul, said the president's promises were fine as far as they went, but added, "I won't be able to trust or believe in these remarks until they are put into practice."