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Kabul Students Clash Over University Name

By Yaroslav Trofimov and Habib Khan Totakhil

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KABUL — Violent street demonstrations broke out in Kabul on Monday, highlighting ethnic tensions over President Hamid Karzai's recent decision to name a university in the Afghan capital after a leading figure in the country's 1990s civil war.

Several hundred students clashed with riot police and a rival student group, throwing rocks and blocking some of Kabul's main roads. The police made numerous arrests. There were no reported serious injuries. Mr. Karzai's spokesman, Aimal Faizi, said later in the day that the Afghan leader was saddened by reports of police brutality against the demonstrators and instructed his security forces not to resort to force in the dispute.

The dispute centers on Kabul's Education University, a school with some 6,000 students that the Afghan government renamed last month as Burhanuddin Rabbani University. Mr. Rabbani was a former Afghan president whose ethnic Tajik forces were involved in bloody battles with rival mujahedeen commanders following the Communist regime's collapse in 1992, reducing much of Kabul to rubble. Later appointed by Mr. Karzai as his top peace negotiator with the Taliban, Mr. Rabbani was assassinated by an insurgent suicide bomber last year.

The government's choice of the university to commemorate Mr. Rabbani immediately sparked protests from some students, whose representatives met Mr. Karzai last week and demanded a reversal of the decision. Monday's violent demonstrations come just weeks after street clashes

between Kabul's ethnic Hazara residents and ethnic Tajiks commemorating Ahmad Shah Massoud, a mujahedeen commander who was allied with Mr. Rabbani during the civil war.

Such ethnic tensions were largely kept under wraps in Kabul following the Taliban's ouster in 2001, but are flaring again as U.S.-led forces pull out and many Afghans fret about renewed civil war. The International Crisis Group, a crisis resolution think tank, warned in a report released Monday that Afghanistan risked "extensive unrest, fragmentation of security services and perhaps even a much wider civil war" unless Mr. Karzai was succeeded as president in a legitimate election in 2014, the year when most U.S.-led forces withdraw.

Many leading figures in Mr. Karzai's government are former mujahedeen warlords from the 1990s civil-war era. At the time, those warlords' abuses gave rise to the Taliban movement.

"We don't want to study in a university that is named after a warlord who killed thousands of people," said Ahmad Fridoon, one of Monday's protesters.

Mr. Faizi, the presidential spokesman, said talks with the protesters are under way and that the controversy should be resolved soon. The Afghan government's national-security adviser, Dadfar Rangin Spanta, said he wasn't worried by the unrest.