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AFP

## Karzai wants to pay Taliban to lay down their arms

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai unveiled an ambitious Western-funded plan Friday to offer money and jobs to tempt Taliban fighters to lay down their arms in an effort to quell a crippling insurgency.

His comments to the BBC came as US Defence Secretary Robert Gates described the Taliban as part of Afghanistan's "political fabric", but said any future role would depend on insurgents laying down their weapons.

Karzai's plan echoed similar proposals by Washington to try and bring low and mid-level extremists back into mainstream society, but the leadership of Islamist insurgent groups remain hostile to negotiations.

Militants led by the Taliban movement have been waging an increasingly deadly rebellion against the Afghan government and foreign troops since a US-led invasion ousted the Taliban regime from power in late 2001.

"We know as the Afghan people we must have peace at any cost," Karzai said in the television interview aired Friday ahead of an international conference on Afghanistan in London next week, where he will present the plan.

"Those that we approach to return will be provided with the abilities to work, to find jobs, to have protection, to resettle in their own communities."

The Taliban gives its foot-soldiers higher salaries than the Afghan government can afford to pay its forces, and the president said his project would have international backing to provide the necessary funds.

Hardline Taliban supporters, who were members of Al-Qaeda or other terror groups, would not be accepted in the scheme, Karzai added. Related article: Taliban part of 'political fabric' in Afghanistan: Gates

The Taliban leadership have repeatedly rebuffed peace talks in the past, and on Friday a spokesman for the militia, Zabihullah Mujahid, reiterated that they would not negotiate with Karzai's government.

"Our only and main goal is the freedom and independence of our country. We cannot be bought by money and bounties. The Taliban will not sell themselves off for cash," Mujahid said, reacting to Karzai's comments.

"We insist on our previous stance that we will not negotiate with this government. Any negotiation now would mean accepting being a slave of America. Our goal is enforcing an Islamic government and withdrawal of foreign forces."

Insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who commands another radical Islamist group Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan, would come to the table with the US and Afghan government, but only under strict conditions, his spokesman Zubair Sediqi said.

"All the foreign forces must leave Afghanistan unconditionally. A permanent ceasefire must be enforced. All prisoners from all side must be freed. An interim administration must take charge for one year," Sediqi told AFP.

Karzai has in the past urged the United States to back talks with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar but Washington has resisted negotiations with any figures linked to wider extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda.

On a visit to Pakistan -- which has come under intense US pressure to do more to wipe out Islamist extremists along its border with Afghanistan -- Gates said the Taliban had to prove they wanted a role in Afghanistan's future.

"The question is whether they are prepared to play a legitimate role in the political fabric of Afghanistan going forward, meaning participating in elections, meaning not assassinating local officials and killing families," he told reporters.

Gates had said earlier that some lower-ranking insurgents might be open to making peace with Kabul, but warned that the senior-most Taliban leaders would unlikely reconcile with Afghanistan's government.

In Washington on Thursday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton unveiled a long-term non-military strategy to stabilise Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The strategy aims to to rebuild the Afghan farm sector, improve governance and bring extremists back into mainstream society.

It complements a military strategy in which President Barack Obama announced on December 1 he would deploy another 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan.

Extra troop commitments from NATO allies are expected to take to around 150,000 the total number of foreign troops operating in Afghanistan under US and NATO command in the coming year.