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Karzai faces anger in Marjah

By Aziz Ahmad Tassal
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HELMAND PROVINCE - Afghan President Hamid Karzai faced an angry reception from people in the southern town of Marjah following a major military assault against the Taliban.

During the unannounced visit on March 7, 10 days after the Afghan flag was raised over this former insurgent stronghold in Helmand province, Karzai said the expulsion of the Taliban meant full-scale reconstruction and development could get underway.

"Marjah will not be recaptured by the opposition," Karzai assured a meeting of tribal elders, officials and ordinary people in the center of Marjah, a ramshackle string of villages and markets known principally for its booming opium trade.

"You will have a good life, full security, employment opportunities and good governance," he added, promising swift delivery of schools, clinics, roads and other infrastructure to the local population of around 50,000 people.

Beginning on February 13 and involving some 15,000 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Afghan troops, Operation Moshtarak, which means "together" in Dari, expelled Taliban forces from the area after only limited resistance. Now Afghan and international authorities are under pressure to clear the surrounding farmland of hundreds of insurgent mines and fulfill development pledges.

Used to hearing generous messages from the Kabul leadership in recent years, local people gathered in Marjah were skeptical of Karzai's promises, and also lambasted the performance of his appointees in the region.

"The people you have sent here have been cruel to us," said one elderly man who rose from the crowd, visibly shaking with anger as he addressed the president. "We do not want such individuals," said the man, who said officials had been involved in abductions and extortion of money from local farmers.

His comments drew applause from the crowd, and after nodding in agreement, Karzai berated one official who was named, saying, "Shame on you!"

People who lost family members in the fighting also challenged the president, who was accompanied on the visit by the commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, United States army General Stanley McChrystal.

"We are fed up with this life of ours," said a man called Harun, whose sister-in-law was killed and two brothers wounded by a shell burst during the battles. "If you do not help us in our predicament, don't provide us with employment opportunities in our area and don't support us, then will you ever help our orphans?"

The number of civilian casualties in the operation remains disputed. According to Helmand governor Gulab Mangal, 15 people died, while local people put the figure at 40. In the worst incident confirmed by NATO, 12 civilians died when two American rockets struck a house.

Led by United States Marines, the operation is considered the first big test of President Barack Obama's new "surge" strategy for Afghanistan. An extra 30,000 US troops are being deployed in an effort to break the Taliban's grip on areas like Marjah.

While hundreds of Afghan police sent to help keep the peace remain widely distrusted, Karzai urged Marjah's population to actively support the national security forces.

"If you want good security and governance, I ask the people and tribal elders to enroll your sons in the government forces so they will be trained and be able to serve and protect their country," said Karzai, who took the day's criticism in his stride.

"Well they are our people and we exchanged views, I heard them and they heard me, they had some very legitimate complaints," he said after the meeting. "They feel abandoned, which in many cases is true, and this sense of abandonment has to go away."

Some local people praised the president for visiting such a remote area and listening to their grievances and demands.

"No such senior official had ever visited Marjah before," resident Sediqollah said. "Moreover, there is no more fighting here now and the Taliban no longer come to my house every day and night and demand food. Karzai's speech shows that life in Marjah is going to improve."

But others who fled to the provincial capital Lashkar Gah ahead of the operation said the situation was still too volatile to return to their homes.

"I cannot go to Marjah because the foreigners arbitrarily search our houses there and disrespect us, which is outrageous," said a local man named Ostad. "It is better not to go there anymore."

To underscore the fragile security situation, insurgents fired several rockets at Marjah during Karzai's speech.

While a Taliban spokesman said in a text message sent to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting that several Afghan security officers died in the salvo, local people said nobody was injured.

"A rocket came but landed far from the meeting area and did not explode," Marjah resident Khan Wali said.