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AFP

British Prime Minister forced to abandon military base visit

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KABUL – British Prime Minister David Cameron was forced to abandon a visit to a military base in Afghanistan on Thursday after intelligence suggested he could be targeted in an insurgent rocket attack.

Making his first visit to Afghanistan as prime minister, Cameron earlier ruled out increasing Britain's troop commitment and called for quicker progress to bring troops home.

He was due to visit troops on a forward operating base in Helmand province, but the trip was abruptly cancelled after intelligence intercepted threatening telephone exchanges by insurgents, aides said.

The conversations suggested insurgents had caught wind of a VIP visit and were preparing to react. One conversation referred to a possible rocket attack on a helicopter.

The prime minister was able to visit an agricultural school built with British funds near Helmand's capital.

But the incident underlined the scale of the challenge in Afghanistan, where an insurgency against the government and its allies has raged for nearly nine years.

Earlier the top NATO commander in Afghanistan confirmed that a flagship campaign against the Taliban would take longer than expected in Kandahar, where violence has increased and Afghan security forces are in short supply.

Cameron, whose visit was not announced in advance for security reasons, held talks earlier with President Hamid Karzai in Kabul and declared Afghanistan "the most important national security issue for my country".

But he added: "the issue of more troops is not remotely on the UK agenda".

Britain has around 9,500 troops in Afghanistan, mostly in the south, as part of a 46-nation force. It is the second-biggest contributor to the NATO-led mission after the United States.

His visit came a day after a suicide bomber killed at least 40 Afghan wedding guests and in a week that has seen 24 NATO soldiers killed in a series of attacks, including the shooting down of a helicopter.

The British government is facing increasing public opposition to the long and costly war in Afghanistan, where 294 British personnel have died since operations began to topple the Taliban government in October 2001.

"We should all the time be asking 'Can we go further, can we go faster?'," said Cameron. "Nobody wants British troops to be in Afghanistan a moment longer than is necessary."

British Defence Secretary Liam Fox caused controversy last month by telling the Times newspaper that he would like British troops to "come back as soon as possible" and referred to Afghanistan to "a broken 13th century country".

When asked about those remarks by a British journalist on Thursday, Karzai played down the comments, noting Afghanistan had "lost nearly two million people in the past 30 years" of war.

"Afghanistan's infrastructure was completely destroyed. Afghanistan's manpower and skills were completely destroyed. In that sense, Afghanistan has gone back centuries. Perhaps that's what Mr. Fox was referring to," Karzai said.

The United States and NATO are building up to a record 150,000 the number of foreign troops in Afghanistan by August as part of a last-ditch strategy centred on Kandahar province to reverse the Taliban momentum and secure major population centres.

"This is the year when we have to make progress -- progress for the sake of the Afghan people, but progress also on behalf of people back at home who want this to work," Cameron said.

But in Brussels, the NATO commander for Afghanistan, US General Stanley McChrystal, conceded that the operation in Kandahar, which neighbours Helmand, would be slower than expected.

"I do think it will happen more slowly than we originally anticipated," McChrystal told reporters, adding it will "take a number of months for this to play out".

With Britain facing a public spending squeeze, Cameron's government wants to cut costs in the Ministry of Defence by at least 25 percent, although it has pledged to do more to support the armed forces.

Cameron announced an additional 67 million pounds (98 million dollars) for British forces to counter the threat from improvised bombs, which are the biggest killer of Western soldiers in Afghanistan.