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Reuters

Protest Flares in Eastern Provinces against U.S. Deal

11/21/2011



SURKHROD - Around 1,000 people, mostly students, took to the streets in eastern Afghanistan on Sunday to protest against plans for a long-term partnership deal with the United States, which they fear could lead to an extended presence of U.S. troops. Afghan political and community leaders endorsed the idea of a strategic partnership, with some caveats, after a 2,000-strong national gathering, or Loya Jirga, which ended on Saturday.

The demonstrators gathered just outside the capital of eastern Nangarhar province and burned an effigy of U.S. President Barack Obama as they protested against the prospect of U.S. troops remaining in Afghanistan.

All foreign combat troops are currently slated to leave Afghanistan by the end of 2014, with security nationwide to be handed over to the national police and army. However, other foreign advisers will remain to work with Afghan forces.

"We are totally against any American presence in Afghanistan, they kill our people in their arbitrary operations," said university student Mohammad Tahir Qane. Other protesters carried banners and shouted "death to America, death to American slaves."

One, 22-year-old Gul Khan, said: "We don't want to be the slaves of Americans forever, our patience is running out. If this pact is signed, we will take to the streets every day." There were some major qualifications on the Jirga's support for a pact, however.

In a declaration made after the meeting, delegates said they opposed a permanent U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and wanted the United States to stop carrying out night raids. The status of the raids is proving a major obstacle to finalizing the bilateral agreement.

The raids have caused widespread resentment among Afghan civilians. Many Afghans, including President Hamid Karzai, say they should be stopped or severely curtailed.

However, Western commanders see the raids as one of their most effective weapons as they seek out insurgents who hide among ordinary Afghans. The Taliban condemned the Loya Jirga in an email sent to media outlets on Sunday.

"We believe that (the agreement) was already designed by the Americans and only used the name of Loya Jirga to announce it," it said in a statement. The Taliban demand that all foreign troops must leave Afghanistan immediately. (Reuters)