

Karzai says Afghanistan doesn't need U.S. troops to stay past end of year

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By Kathy Gannon and Rahim Faiez

Afghan president Hamid Karzai said U.S. soldiers can leave at the end of the year because his military already protects 93 percent of the country and was ready to take over entirely. (Mohammad Ismail/Reuters)

KABUL — In his final address to Afghanistan's parliament Saturday, President Hamid Karzai said U.S. soldiers can leave at the end of the year because his military already protects 93 percent of the country and was ready to take over entirely.

He reiterated his stance that he will not sign a pact with the United States that would provide for a residual force of U.S. troops to remain behind.

The Afghan president has come under heavy pressure, both from the United States and Afghan tribal leaders, to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement. The force would train and mentor Afghan troops, and some U.S. Special Forces would also be left behind to hunt down members of al-Qaeda.

All 10 candidates seeking the presidency in the April 5 election have said they would sign the security agreement, but Karzai himself does not appear to want his legacy to include a commitment to a longer foreign troop presence in his country.

Karzai was brought to power in the wake of the 2001 U.S.-led invasion and subsequently won presidential elections in 2004 and 2009. Under Afghanistan's constitution, he is banned from seeking a third elected term.

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Afghan troops raise their voices against President Hamid Karzai, demanding that he sign a security pact with the United States.

Karzai in recent years has espoused a combative nationalism, with his hour-long speech Saturday no exception.

"I want to say to all those foreign countries who maybe out of habit or because they want to interfere, that they should not interfere," he said.

Karzai said the war in Afghanistan was "imposed" on his nation. He said the United States could bring peace to Afghanistan if it went after terrorist sanctuaries and countries that supported terrorism, a reference to Pakistan, where Afghan insurgents have some times found refuge.

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In his speech, Karzai again urged Taliban insurgents to join the peace process. He suggested that Pakistan was behind the killing earlier this year of a Taliban leader who supported the peace process.

No one has taken responsibility for the attack.

Throughout his speech, Karzai spoke of his accomplishments during the past 12 years, saying schools were functioning, rights were being given to women, energy projects were coming online and the Afghan currency had been stabilized.

"I know the future president will protect these gains and priorities and will do the best for peace in the country, and I as an Afghan citizen will support peace and will cooperate," he said.

— **Associated Press**