



AP INTERVIEW: FORMER PRESIDENT SAYS US FAILED IN AFGHANISTAN

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Afghanistan's former president said Sunday the United States came to his country to fight extremism and bring stability to his war-tortured nation and is leaving nearly 20 years later having failed at both.

In an interview with The Associated Press just weeks before the last U.S. and NATO troops leave Afghanistan, ending their 'forever war,' Hamid Karzai said extremism is at its "highest point" and the departing troops are leaving behind a disaster.

"The international community came here 20 years ago with this clear objective of fighting extremism and bringing stability ... but extremism is at the highest point today. So they have failed," he said.

Their legacy is a war-ravaged nation in "total disgrace and disaster."

"We recognize as Afghans all our failures, but what about the bigger forces and powers who came here for exactly that purpose? Where are they leaving us now?" he asked and answered: "In total disgrace and disaster."

Still, Karzai, who had a conflicted relationship with the United States during his 13-year rule, wanted the troops to leave, saying Afghans were united behind an overwhelming desire for peace and needed now to take responsibility for their future.

"We will be better off without their military presence," he said. "I think we should defend our own country and look after our own lives. ... Their presence (has given us) what we have now. ... We don't want to continue with this misery and indignity that we are facing. It is better for Afghanistan that they leave."

Karzai's rule followed the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 by a U.S.-led coalition that launched its invasion to hunt down and destroy the al-Qaida network and its leader, Osama bin Laden, blamed for the 9/11 attacks on America.

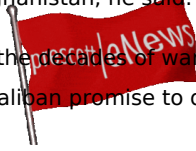
During Karzai's rule, women re-emerged, girls again attended school, a vibrant, young civil society emerged, new high-rises went up in the capital Kabul and roads and infrastructure were built. But his rule was also characterized by allegations of widespread corruption, a flourishing drug trade and in the final years relentless quarrels with Washington that continue even until today.

"The (US/NATO military) campaign was not against extremism or terrorism, the campaign was more against Afghan villages and hopes; putting Afghan people in prisons, creating prisons in our own country ... and bombing all villages. That was very wrong."

In April, when President Joe Biden announced the final withdrawal of the remaining 2,500-3,500 troops, he said America was leaving having achieved its goals. Al-Qaida had been greatly diminished and bin Laden was dead. America no longer needed boots on the ground

to fight the terrorist threats that might emanate from Afghanistan, he said.

Still, the U.S.'s attempts to bring about a political end to the decades of war have been elusive. It signed a deal with the Taliban in February 2020 to withdraw its troops in exchange for a Taliban promise to denounce terrorist groups and keep Afghanistan from again being a staging arena for attacks on America.



There is little evidence the Taliban are fulfilling their part of the bargain. The United Nations claims the Taliban and al-Qaida are still linked. The architect of the U.S. deal and current U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad says some progress has been made but without offering any details.

Karzai has had harsh words and uncompromising criticism of U.S. war tactics over the past two decades in Afghanistan. Yet he has become a linchpin of sorts in a joint effort being launched by the United States and Britain to get a quarrelsome Afghan leadership in Kabul united enough to talk peace with the Taliban. The insurgent group has shown little interest in negotiating and instead has stepped up its assaults on government positions.

The Taliban have made considerable strides since the May 1 start of the U.S. and NATO withdrawal. They have overrun dozens of districts, often negotiating their surrender from Afghan national security forces.

But in many instances the fighting has been intense. Just last week a brutal assault by the Taliban in northern Faryab province killed 22 of Afghanistan's elite commandos, led by a local hero Col. Sohrab Azimi, who was also killed and widely mourned.

"The desire of the Afghan people, overwhelmingly, all over the country is for peace," said Karzai, who despite being out of power since 2014 has lost little of his political influence and is most often at the center of the country's political machinations.

Diplomats, Western officials, generals, tribal elders and politicians on all ends of Afghanistan's political spectrum regularly beat a path to Karzai's door in the heart of the Afghan capital.

As the final military withdrawal is already more than 50% complete, the need for a political settlement or even a visible path to an eventual settlement would seem to be taking on greater urgency even as Afghans by the thousands are seeking an exit. They say they are frustrated by relentless corruption, marauding criminal gangs — some linked to the powerful warlords in Kabul —and worsening insecurity. Few see a future that is not violent.

Karzai had a message for both sides in the conflict: "The two Afghan sides, none of them should be fighting." While accusing both Pakistan, where the Taliban leadership is headquartered, and the United States of stoking the fighting, Karzai said it is up to Afghans to end decades of war.

To Pakistan's military and civilian leadership, Karzai said Afghanistan wants "a civilized relationship... if Pakistan adopts an attitude away from the use of extremism against Afghanistan, this relationship can grow into a beautiful relationship, into a very fruitful relationship for both sides."

To the warring sides in Afghanistan, Karzai said: "I'm very emphatic and clear about this, both sides should think of the lives of the Afghan people and the property... fighting is destruction."

"The only answer is Afghans getting together. ... We must recognize that this is our country and we must stop killing each other."

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