



# Afghanistan Update

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A twice-weekly, one-page situation report from the [Afghanistan Congressional Communications Hub](#) on the latest developments affecting U.S. policy and engagement in Afghanistan.

## Key Issue: Obama's Surprise Visit to Afghanistan

- President Obama's visit to Afghanistan on Sunday generated intense media interest. Shrouded in secrecy for security reasons, the undertaking had Obama on the ground for just over six hours.
- Obama met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and members of his cabinet, and addressed US troops.
- The Economist reports that Obama officials say that, in a private meeting, he told Karzai that America wanted to see more action on tackling corruption and on improving the quality of the country's public servants. The article also cited sources who expressed frustration that Karzai is unlikely to remove Ahmed Wali Karzai, his half-brother, from his power base in Kandahar.
- The two are expected to meet again in Washington on May 12.

## Key Issue: Kandahar Offensive

- US military officials revealed further plans on Monday to push the Taliban out of their traditional stronghold – the city of Kandahar – by the beginning of August, with a major offensive starting in June.
- Following the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in August, the campaign would shift to a "secure and deliver government" phase through mid-October, according to anonymous military sources.
- As part of the overall offensive, NATO commanders are planning to place Afghan forces at the forefront of the operation.
- Officials have repeatedly stated that political efforts will lead the impetus for the campaign, closely paralleled by the military component, in order to move past local differences and balances of power exploited by the Taliban.
- It is reported that a planned withdrawal of British troops from Helmand may result in those forces being moved to Kandahar, although some commentators worry that such a move would provoke political controversy given Britain's [military history](#) in the province.

## In the News

- The lower house of Afghanistan's parliament rejected a decree by President Hamid Karzai that rewrote Afghan election law. Announced in February while parliament was in recess, the decree sought to give Karzai total control over Electoral Complaints Commission appointments. It now goes to the upper house.
  - The Pentagon is expanding its efforts to provide equipment and training for the smaller partner nations in Afghanistan. Defense officials said the initial aid package aimed at six small countries — Georgia, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia — is about \$50 million and will be distributed almost equally among them.
  - As anticipated, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has asked Canada to maintain some of its troop presence in Afghanistan once that country's military mission ends in 2011. In response, Canadian officials reiterated their plans to continue to have an ongoing development and diplomatic relationship with Afghanistan through the Canadian embassy in Kabul once the military component ends.
  - A United Nations report said that Afghanistan has become the world's top supplier of cannabis, with cultivation in half of its provinces. The report also noted that along with opium, the drug's cultivation provides an additional source of revenue for insurgents.
- Elsewhere, opium seizures rose 924 % last year due to better cooperation between Afghan and international forces, according to the top U.S. drug enforcement official.

## In Quotes

*"This is a great day for democratic processes in Afghanistan and I think that this is a moment that the Afghan legislator has stood up to provide a check on the executive branch,"* **Peter Lepsch**, who was chief legal officer for the ECC during the 2009 elections, 31 March 2010.

## Karzai Speech

Concerns have been raised about a speech that President Karzai gave on Thursday, in which he accused the United Nations and other international agencies of deliberately undermining Afghanistan's electoral process, the parliament, and his own ability to be an effective leader. "[Foreigners] don't want the parliamentary election to take place. They also want the parliament to be like me, battered and wounded, they want me to be an illegitimate president and they want the parliament to be illegitimate," **President Karzai** said.

## UN Report: Afghan Poverty, Corruption

The majority of Afghans live in dire poverty despite an estimated \$35 billion in aid over the past decade, according to a [report](#) by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights published this week.

The report also criticized the international community for placing too much emphasis on security, at the expense of long-term development.

The report concluded that over a third of Afghans live in "absolute poverty" and that about the same number are only slightly above the poverty line. It also said Afghanistan has the world's third highest rate of child mortality.

The [Afghanistan Congressional Communications Hub](#) serves Members and staff by providing relevant and accessible information on Afghanistan. It is non-partisan.

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