

Hamid Karzai refuses to sign US-Afghan security pact

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A security pact with the US, which is critical to Afghanistan's ability to pay its soldiers and hold off the Taliban, is in limbo, after President Hamid Karzai shrugged off the recommendations of a national council that has approved the deal and said he would continue talks with Washington.

After a year of negotiations, the Loya Jirga, or grand assembly, of 2,500 delegates approved the agreement to keep US troops in the country after the current combat mission ends in 2014.

But Karzai stunned US diplomats and many of his own security officials when he told the opening session of the jirga that the Bilateral security agreement should not be signed until after presidential elections in April.

Washington quickly announced that a deal had to be agreed by the end of the year, but on Sunday Karzai said that the US had to prove its good intentions by keeping its soldiers out of Afghan homes, ensuring the vote was transparent and promoting peace talks with the Taliban.

"If I sign and there is no security, then who is going to be blamed for it?" he told delegates, who interrupted his speech several times to both question and support him.

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