

I WISH I HAD The Taliban As My Soldiers

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President Hamid Karzai has come under fire for not doing enough to stem corruption in Afghanistan. He speaks to SPIEGEL about the coalition forces' ties with warlords, rumors about his family's influence and why he believes dirty deals are sometimes necessary.

SPIEGEL INTERVIEW WITH Hamid Karzai

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY SUSANNE KOELBL AND ULLRICH FICHTNER.

SPIEGEL: Mr. President, much has been written about the failures of the international community in Afghanistan. But a good part of the so-called insurgency in the south and east of your country appears to have more to do with a protest movement against a bad government and corrupt elite. It doesn't seem like much of an exaggeration to talk about a resurgence of the Taliban. Is it not true that many Afghans are only joining the Taliban because they don't consider them to be corrupt?

Hamid Karzai: I disagree. That is absolutely wrong.

SPIEGEL: Some Afghan people say that the president himself, who is appointing high-ranking officials in Kabul and in the provinces, is fueling the insurgency with these personnel decisions. Is that there any truth in that?

Karzai: Governance has improved immensely in Afghanistan. For the first time in six years, the Afghan budget has become transparent, there are no longer any secret funds. Before, the governors did whatever they wanted. Now there is a reporting requirement and there are former governors who were criminal or corrupt who are now in prison, like the former governor of Baghdis province. Of course the country needs more time, but the problems we have in the south and east are not because of bad governance.

SPIEGEL: Then what are the reasons for the difficult situation there?

Karzai: There is a lot of interference from abroad. The south part of the country has always been the center of the Taliban activity; they came from there. And there are

also traces of the mujahedeen's decades-long battle. These are all factors.

The International Community Finally Agreed After Two Years Of Very Intense And Angry Negotiations That The Police Are A Problem And In The Middle Of 2007 They Began To Work With Us.

SPIEGEL: Some of your closest aides are suspected of stealing land, drug smuggling and having illegal militias, among them respected governors and police chiefs. Your attorney general, Abdul Jabar Sabet, just named a few of them, including the governor of Nangarhar. Why do you still protect these people?

Karzai: I am not protecting anybody. We are trying to govern Afghanistan and bring peace and stability. I know about the problems with the police. The international community finally agreed after two years of very intense and angry negotiations that the police are a problem and in the middle of 2007 they began to work with us. The checkpoints on the roads, for example, were developed during the years of the Soviet invasion, a time when the country became lawless and each local commander set up his own checkpoint to collect money.

SPIEGEL: During the Taliban times there were no checkpoints at all.

Karzai: That was the best aspect of the Taliban. They did a lot wrong, but they also did a few things right. I wish I had the Taliban as my soldiers. I wish they were serving me and not people in Pakistan or others. When we came back to Afghanistan, the international community brought back all those people who had turned away from the Taliban ...

SPIEGEL: ... you mean the brutal commanders who fought in the civil war ...

Karzai: ... who then became partners with the foreign allies and are still paid by them today for their support. It is not always easy for me to find a way that can enable Afghanistan's administration to function.

SPIEGEL: Dirty deals are still necessary for the stability of Afghanistan?

Karzai: Absolutely necessary, because we lack the power to solve these problems in other ways. What do you want? War? Let me give you an example. We wanted to arrest a really terrible warlord, but we couldn't do it because he is being protected

by a particular country. We found out that he was being paid \$30,000 a month to stay on his good side. They even used his soldiers as guards ...

It Is Similar For Ahmad Wali: These Stories About Him Being Involved In Drug Smuggling Emerged In 2004 After The Presidential Elections. The Story Appeared In The New York Times.

SPIEGEL: That sounds like the story of Commander Nasir Mohammed in Badakhshan, a province where German soldiers are based.

Karzai: I don't want to name the country because it will hurt a close friend and ally. But there are also many other countries who contract the Afghan militias and their leaders. So I can only work where I can act, and I must always calculate what will happen before doing anything.

SPIEGEL: There is a list of high-level drug lords and smugglers, and a number of well-known figures in the establishment. Some are your advisors and some are even alleged to be part of your cabinet. Why haven't we seen the trial of a single prominent person?

Karzai: This list is a myth. I have never received such a list. I have asked the international community to deliver this supposed list to me, but it has never been presented.

SPIEGEL: Your former interior minister, Ali Ahmad Jalali, claimed to possess such a list.

Karzai: Then you would have to look for that in the archive of the Interior Ministry. It is also incorrect what you say: A lot of drug smugglers have been taken to court. Why are you quoting Mr. Jalali as having this list?

SPIEGEL: Because he once publicly stated he did. Are you doubting his credibility because he was one of the ministers who became entangled in a corruption scandal surrounding the appropriation of land for construction in Kabul?

Karzai: Some members of the international community are strongly connected to corrupt elements and use them as their sources. Let me tell you about another case: One of our allies in the coalition gave a commander in another part of the

country land and money for his loyalty. Should I bring him to trial? Should I bring Mr. Jalali to trial?

SPIEGEL: Why not?

Karzai: You cannot expect us to punish an Afghan who has lived his whole life in this country, who has suffered, sacrificed his family, given blood for this country, for having committed a little crime or a little corruption. And then the person who had long been away and first came back with the international community and loots the country can get away with it? This cannot be allowed to happen.

SPIEGEL: Since you became president, your family has become highly successful in the business world and also in politics. Your brother Mahmoud Karzai is currently CEO of a cement plant in Pul-i-Khumri in the northeast that was the envy of many competitors. Two other brothers, Qayum and Ahmad Wali, are powerful politicians in the southern part of the country. Many there say that no decisions can be made without the approval of the Karzais. Is there a grain of truth to that?

Karzai: This is really a lot of rubbish. Ahmad Wali has been accused of drug dealing. I have thoroughly investigated all these accusations, and of course none of them are true. Mahmoud was a businessman for a number of years in the United States, he even has an American passport. He was very successful there and made a lot of money. He returned when the US came to Afghanistan. Now he has become the CEO of a factory and there is nothing wrong with that.

SPIEGEL: He is also the head of a large group of investors that is doing big business in Afghanistan. Is it helpful to be a close relative of the president?

Karzai: To the contrary. It has made things more complicated for them because I make things very difficult for them, extremely difficult. That applies to Mahmoud, too. He is very carefully observed, not just by me, but also from the ministers, who I have instructed to strictly observe him. It is similar for Ahmad Wali: These stories about him being involved in drug smuggling emerged in 2004 after the presidential elections. The story appeared in the New York Times. I immediately called the US ambassador, American intelligence, the British, the Europeans. I called them five times and they said, "Mr. President, these are rumors, probably propaganda." No

one presented any evidence, nothing.

SPIEGEL: The south is the hub of drug smuggling. Is it possible that Ahmad Wali Karzai, one of the most influential politicians in Kandahar, who leads the provincial council, doesn't have the slightest idea what is going on or has nothing to do with it?

Karzai: Yes, it is very much possible. Our family has been influential in this part of the country for 300 years. I am the president of Afghanistan today, but I do not have the slightest idea who is involved in the drug business there. Nor is the drug dealing solely a problem for Afghanistan. The lion's share of the money goes to the international mafia and not to Afghans.

SPIEGEL: You meet regularly for negotiations with representatives of the Taliban - like Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, the Taliban's former foreign minister, or Mullah Saif, the Taliban's former ambassador to Pakistan - but so far without any results. And yet we still see new suicide attacks almost every day.

Karzai: Negotiations aren't moving forward the way we would like them too. But we will continue. Taliban who are part of al-Qaida should in no way be permitted to return. But those who have joined the Taliban out of fear or because they were needy are Afghanistan's native sons and they are more than welcome back in their country.

SPIEGEL: You are expected to run for a second term in office in 2009. Why do you believe you would make the best president?

Karzai: I don't claim to be the best. I hope that this country will soon have the opportunity to find people even better than me. Still, I do have one legacy I would like to leave behind: the legacy of democratic rule. I have also been looking for alternatives, my own replacement.

SPIEGEL: Being the president of Afghanistan is an almost impossible job. How are you able to remain perpetually optimistic?

Karzai: I believe I have led this country very well. Yes, I have made mistakes. I was not in a situation to solve problems like corruption and impunity. But that was beyond my power and beyond the time limit that I have at my disposal. However,

we have saved this country from another civil war and people from starving. And the same people who once fought against each other in the streets of Kabul are now sitting in parliament. Afghanistan's flag is flying all over the world. There are new roads, the first students received their degrees from Kabul University a few days ago. That is great!

SPIEGEL: Mr. President, we thank you for this interview.