

In surprise Afghan visit, Obama presses Karzai
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US President Barack Obama paid a surprise visit to Afghanistan Sunday, his first since taking office, to press Afghan leaders to end corruption and rally American troops in the war on the Taliban.

NONE "We are here to help Afghans forge a hard-won peace while realizing the extraordinary potential of the Afghan people," the US commander-in-chief said in a rousing speech to an estimated 2,000 US troops.

"Our broad mission is clear," Obama said of the bloody, dragging war against the Taliban launched in late 2001.

"We're going to deny Al-Qaeda safe haven. We're going to reverse the Taliban's momentum."

The late night trip, shrouded in secrecy amid security concerns, lasted just over five hours during which Obama met with President Hamid Karzai, and then addressed US forces at the Bagram air base, close to the capital Kabul.

NONE During brief talks Obama pressed Karzai, re-elected in controversial elections last year, to step up the fight against corruption and the drugs trade.

"The American people are encouraged by the progress that has been made," Obama told Karzai after the one-on-one meeting, which included an invitation for the Afghan leader to visit Washington on May 12.

But Obama also urged Karzai, with whom he has had a testy relationship since taking office in January 2009, to "continue to make progress" on the civilian front, including on governance, the fight against graft and the rule of law.

"We had a good discussion of the issues between our two countries, about the region, and of continued struggle against extremism and terrorism," Karzai said at a late-night ceremony at the presidential palace.

The US leader made the dramatic through-the-night flight to Afghanistan to thank American troops for their "tremendous sacrifices" and to rally them in the fight at the center of his administration's counter-terrorism efforts.

Dressed in a leather bomber jacket, Obama told cheering troops he was confident they would get the job done to stop the Taliban from regaining power and halt Al-Qaeda.

"Al-Qaeda and their extremist allies are a threat to the people of Afghanistan and a threat to the people of America, but they're also a threat to people all around the world," Obama said.

NONE "My main job here today is to say thank you on behalf of the entire American people. You are part of the finest military in the history of the world. And we are proud of you."

And he pointed to successes including flushing the Taliban out of their stronghold in Marjah, recent strikes against Al-Qaeda leaders, and Pakistan's help in cracking down on militant

hideouts.

Obama and Karzai met for about 25 minutes and held "very productive" and "businesslike" talks, a senior administration official said.

Karzai's spokesman Waheed Omar told Tolo TV: "The biggest goal for the trip was the reiteration of the long-term commitment of the US to Afghanistan, a strong Afghanistan, and a stable Afghanistan."

He added that Obama also told Karzai that "the US will be standing by the people of Afghanistan and will not leave the Afghan people."

Obama later met with the US ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry and top US commander General Stanley McChrystal to discuss "where they were after the series of meetings," a senior US official said.

Obama landed in Afghanistan amid a spike in deaths of foreign troops in the escalating war, and as the first big offensive of his new strategy unfolds in Helmand province, with Taliban strongholds in Kandahar among future targets.

He traveled to Afghanistan emboldened by the best week of his presidency, after passing a historic health care reform law and concluding a major nuclear arms control treaty with Russia.

But the Afghan war, and his fateful decision to surge more troops into a conflict launched after the September 11 attacks in 2001, still holds the capacity to humble his presidency.

Obama announced in December that he was pouring 30,000 more troops into Afghanistan, in a gamble he said was designed to "seize the initiative" to end the unpopular war and start a US pullout in July 2011.

The United States and NATO have more than 121,000 troops in Afghanistan, set to rise to 150,000 by August as part of the new plan to reverse the Taliban momentum, particularly in the south, and hasten an end to the war.

Most of the 10,000 extra troops that have arrived so far have been sent to the volatile south, the spiritual heartland of the Taliban insurgency.

More than 105 foreign troops have been killed this year, more than double the number who died in the first two months of 2009.

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