

**Afghan leader challenges Taliban 'brothers' over attacks**  
**Reuters**  
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KABUL, April 17 — President Hamid Karzai said today coordinated Taliban attacks in Kabul and three provinces had only prolonged a foreign presence in Afghanistan and he challenged the insurgents to do more for the good of the country.

The weekend attacks on the parliament and Kabul's diplomatic quarter had caused only Afghan deaths and worked to hurt economic and security confidence, Karzai said.

Clashes raged for 18 hours before Afghan security forces backed by NATO killed the insurgents. Karzai said the violence had done nothing to win support for Taliban aims of getting foreigners and NATO-led troops to leave.

"You did nothing for Islam, you did not work for Afghanistan's independence and you did not work for its people, freedom and development. You worked to prolong a foreign presence," Karzai said in a speech commemorating almost 150 years since the birth of an Afghan reformer.

But in an effort to keep alive reconciliation efforts with the insurgents and hopes of a peace deal before most foreign combat troops leave the country in 2014, Karzai said he would not stop calling the Taliban "brothers".

"Some criticise me in the Afghan media for saying the Taliban are brothers, but I won't give up," he said to enthusiastic applause.

Karzai yesterday laid most of the blame for the Taliban assault on NATO and his government's Western backers for the failure of intelligence agents to prevent it.

Thirty-five insurgents were killed along with 11 members of the Afghan security forces and four civilians.

But NATO defended intelligence efforts and said it was not possible to block every insurgent attack in the conflict-racked country, where the war has entered its 11th year and where NATO is expected to complete its combat drawdown by the end of 2014.

"You will never be able to, in a counterinsurgency, stop every attempt of determined insurgents to infiltrate into a city of three million," Brigadier General Carsten Jacobson, spokesman for NATO forces in Afghanistan, told Reuters.

Australians going

The assault raised fresh questions about Afghanistan's prospects just as NATO members with forces there are making plans to get troops out.

Australia said today it would start withdrawing its troops this year and expected all international forces there to be playing a supporting role for Afghan forces by mid-2013.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard said she would take her timetable to a NATO conference on Afghanistan in Chicago in late May, before which the US government is aiming to sign a strategic agreement on a future presence in the country after NATO's 2014 combat force withdrawal.

Karzai challenged the United States to do more in the agreement to fund infrastructure and improvements that would be of benefit to all Afghans, rather than just spend billions on training and equipping the police and army.

"We would like to help them save their money and give some of it back to us," Karzai said of the United States, adding he wanted at least US\$2 billion (RM6.12 billion) a year from Washington after 2014.

He said that while the United States had promised money as part of its strategic partnership, it had not specified an amount.

"Write the figure, just write something!" Karzai said.

The suppression of Sunday's Taliban attacks has been billed by NATO as proof of the fledgling Afghan security forces' ability to confront the Taliban, while Karzai and the US pursue twin track peace talks with the insurgency.

The Taliban in March said they were suspending peace talks with the United States and a plan to open an office in the Gulf state of Qatar to smooth negotiations, accusing Washington of double-dealing over confidence-building measures including the release of insurgents from a US military prison in Cuba.

Karzai said last week he was considering moving forward by a year a 2014 presidential election to avoid overburdening the country as NATO forces were pulling out. But analysts were quick to point out the difficulty in doing so legally. — Reuters

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