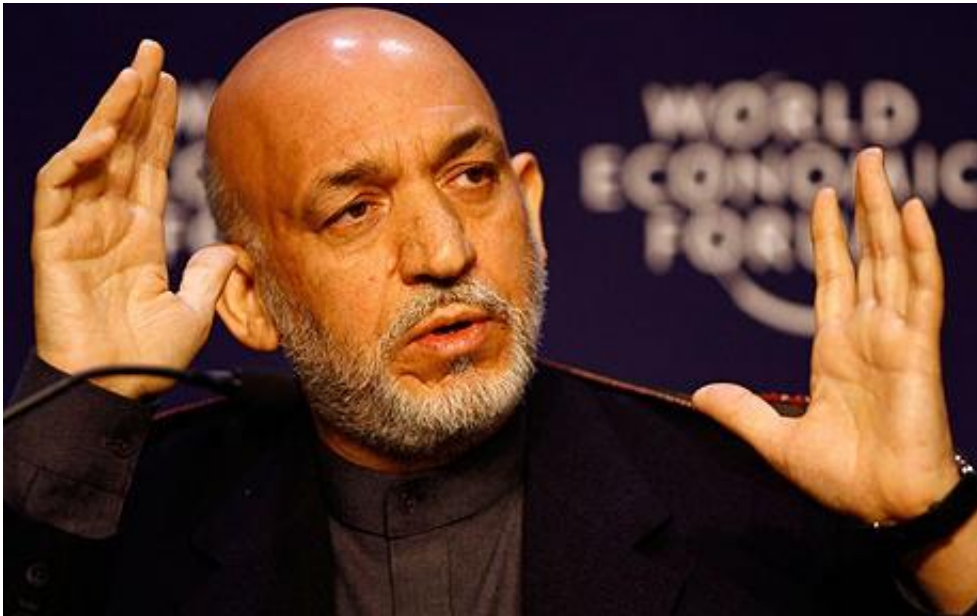


Afghan leader pledges to protect Taliban from US

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has said he will personally protect the former head of Afghanistan's Taliban regime from the US if he joins peace talks.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai has fallen out of favour with Britain and the US Photo: GETTY

By Ben Farmer in Kabul

3:23PM GMT 16 Nov 2008

Mr Karzai said he would go "to any length" to protect Mullah Mohammad Omar, who has a \$10 million price on his head from the US government.

He challenged his Western backers to leave the country or remove him if they disagreed.

After three years of an increasingly violent insurgency, the Afghan government has said it is willing to hold talks with any groups which recognise the country's constitution. Government representatives and former members of the Taliban are said to have met in Saudi Arabia two months ago, though both sides deny talks took place.

"If I hear from him that he is willing to come to Afghanistan or to negotiate for peace... I, as the president of Afghanistan, will go to any length providing protection," Mr Karzai told a press conference.

"If I say I want protection for Mullah Omar, the international community has two choices – remove me or leave if they disagree," he said.

[Taliban 'rejects' Karzai's offer to protect its leader](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/3473496/Taliban-rejects-Hamid-Karzais-offer-to-protect-its-leader.html)

[\(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/3473496/Taliban-rejects-Hamid-Karzais-offer-to-protect-its-leader.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/3473496/Taliban-rejects-Hamid-Karzais-offer-to-protect-its-leader.html)

Omar has been in hiding since his regime was toppled by the US for refusing to hand over al-Qaeda terrorists behind the September 11 attacks. Afghan officials say he is hiding in Quetta in Pakistan, while Pakistan says he remains in southern Afghanistan.

Mr Karzai said the Taliban leadership still had to prove it wanted peace. "We are not in that stage yet. Right now, I have to hear it from the Taliban leadership, that they are willing to have peace in Afghanistan," he said.

A Taliban representative last week said the group would never negotiate with Afghan or Western officials while foreign troops remained in the country.

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