

More U.S. troops, funds to fight Taliban

by UPI

WASHINGTON -- U.S. President Barack Obama outlined a new Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy boosting troop levels and funding and setting expectations for the countries' leaders.

He said 4,000 U.S. troops would be deployed to Afghanistan during the spring to train Afghan security forces, a move that "will fully resource our effort to train and support the Afghan army and police," Obama said Friday before an audience that included military personnel, civilians and diplomats from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In addition, Obama ordered an undefined, "substantial increase" in the number of civilians working in Afghanistan and called on allies, the United Nations and international aid organizations for support.

"The future of Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the future of its neighbor, Pakistan," Obama said. "In the nearly eight years since (the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks), al-Qaida and its extremist allies have moved across the border to the remote areas of the Pakistani frontier."

Obama called on Congress to pass bipartisan legislation that would authorize \$1.5 billion in direct aid annually over five years and a bipartisan bill that would create opportunity zones in Pakistan along the Afghanistan border region to develop the economy.

He also outlined conditions that must be met by Afghan leaders, saying "we cannot turn a blind eye" to corrupt practices. He said he will seek a new pact with Afghan government leaders that "cracks down on corrupt behavior and sets clear benchmarks" for international aid.

The United States won't provide "a blank check" to Pakistan, either, he said.

"Pakistan must demonstrate its commitment to rooting out al-Qaida and the violent extremists within its borders," Obama said. "And we will insist that action be taken -- one way or another -- when we have intelligence about high-level terrorist targets."

The goal is clear, he said, "to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to prevent their return to either country in the future. That is the goal that must be achieved. ... And to the terrorists who oppose us, my message is the same: We will defeat you.

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