**Karzai to push for removing up to 50 ex-Taliban officials from U.N. blacklist**

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UNITED NATIONS -- Afghan President Hamid Karzai plans to seek the removal of up to 50 former Taliban officials from a U.N. terrorism blacklist -- more than a quarter of those on the list -- in a gesture intended to advance political reconciliation talks with insurgents, according to a senior Afghan official.

The Afghan government has sought for years to delist former Taliban figures who it says have cut ties with the Islamist movement. But the campaign to cull names from the list, which imposes a travel ban and other restrictions on 137 individuals tied to the Taliban, has taken on renewed urgency in recent weeks as Karzai has begun to press for a political settlement to Afghanistan's nearly nine-year-old conflict.

The diplomatic outreach at the United Nations has been met with resistance from U.N. officials, who are demanding more evidence that the individuals in question have renounced violence, embraced the new Afghan constitution and severed any links with the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

On Tuesday, Richard C. Holbrooke, President Obama's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, traveled to New York to meet with U.N. officials to press them to move forward on the delisting process, according to sources familiar with the talks.

The United States opposes the delisting of some of the most violent Taliban fighters, including leader Mohammad Omar. But Holbrooke is eager to reach agreement on removing a slate of purportedly reformed Taliban members ahead of a major international conference in Kabul this month that is aimed at bolstering stability in Afghanistan.

Thomas Mayr-Harting, an Austrian diplomat responsible for overseeing the terrorism list, has made it clear that a specially charged U.N. committee he leads will not approve the delisting solely to boost the peace process. He has also voiced frustration that Afghanistan has not made a detailed case for delisting.

"Let me make this absolutely clear: If this information is to be taken into consideration in the course of the ongoing review, receiving it must be a matter not of weeks but of days," he told the U.N. Security Council on June 30.

In October 1999, the Security Council imposed sanctions on members of the Taliban, which ruled Afghanistan at the time, for refusing to surrender Osama bin Laden to U.S. authorities in connection with al-Qaeda's role in the August 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa. In January 2001, more than 100 Taliban leaders were added to the list.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the United States ushered through resolutions that added al-Qaeda members and their supporters to the blacklist. The measures include a travel ban, an arms embargo and a prohibition on the direct or indirect provision of funds or economic resources.

The stringent requirements of the U.N. review process have undercut Karzai's efforts. The Afghan president is now planning to make a more modest request that 30 to 50 names be delisted to "remove all those Taliban who are not part of al-Qaeda and are not terrorists," according to a senior Afghan official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, as did others quoted for this article.

Russia has repeatedly rebuffed requests for removing former Taliban officials from the list, arguing that it has seen insufficient evidence that they have broken links with the armed insurgency and its al-Qaeda allies. Moscow has long had antipathy for the Islamist Taliban movement, which shares some roots in the mujaheddin resistance that drove Soviet forces out of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Russia also sees the Taliban and al-Qaeda as maintaining ties to Islamist militant groups in Central Asia and the Caucasus. When the Taliban was in power, Russia provided military backing to the Northern Alliance, which resisted Taliban rule.

"The Russian position is perfectly reasonable," said Richard Barrett, who heads an expert panel established by the Security Council to monitor enforcement of the sanctions against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. "People should not come off the list just because there is a political process. Mullah Omar and others aren't prevented from participating in the political process even though they are on the list."

As it awaits Afghanistan's request to delist more former Taliban officials, the Security Council has proceeded with its review of about a dozen individuals whose names were submitted for removal several years ago.

Among them is a former Taliban education minister, Mullah Arsala Rahmani, who is a member of the Afghan senate.

Rahmani said in an interview that after he spoke with a U.N. delegation in Kabul last month, he was led to believe that he "was going to be removed from the blacklist," although he said he was not told that explicitly.

"I'm very happy I'm going to be removed," Rahmani said. Under the terms of the sanctions, his bank account has been frozen. Once his name is cut from the blacklist, he said, "I'll be able to open an account and . . . get some money."

Despite being blacklisted, though, Rahmani said his travel has not been restricted. He said he has traveled to Britain, France and Kenya since his name was put on the list.

"Karzai wants the U.N. to remove all the people's names from the blacklist," Rahmani said. "And that's something that all Afghans want, because it will help in the process of peace negotiations."

Partlow reported from Kabul.