Afghan Delegates Agree on the Need for Foreign Troops

By CARLOTTA GALL

KABUL, Afghanistan, May 8 - President Hamid Karzai, in a meeting with more than 1,000 representatives from the provinces who gathered here in the capital, won broad support on Sunday for the continued presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan after parliamentary elections in the fall.

It was the first national consultation on the issue since a constitutional convention in January 2004 and Mr. Karzai's own election last October, and it was the closest thing to a parliamentary debate the country has had on the extended presence of foreign troops.

The reaction was broadly positive, the presidential spokesman, Jawed Ludin, said at a briefing after the meeting, which was closed to news organizations. "We need the assistance of the United States, NATO troops and international coalition forces until we have our own security forces and reach the point that we no longer need that assistance," he said, summing up the meeting's findings.

"It is clear that Afghanistan still needs international aid and it is too soon for the international community to say Afghanistan is now a success, and we have completed our job, and we are going home," he said. "We are still far from that point."

Delegates interviewed after the session said that they agreed that Afghanistan still needed foreign troops and large-scale international aid, but that they also told Mr. Karzai to delay any decision on the long-term presence of foreign troops or permanent bases in Afghanistan until a Parliament was elected.

"This is not a simple issue," said Shahida Husseini, a delegate from Kandahar. "Parliament will have to decide on this," she added.

Sayed Muhammad Hussein Husseini, a delegate from Western Afghanistan, said, "There was a discussion on the presence of foreign troops and how long they should remain in Afghanistan, and the majority view was that this is not a meeting where we can decide about it and we should wait for Parliament."

The delegates said Mr. Karzai reminded them that the fledgling Afghan national army could not operate without American financial support. He also asked the delegates about an American plan to bring Afghan detainees held abroad - namely in detention at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba - back to prisons in Afghanistan and under Afghan jurisdiction, and delegates overwhelmingly supported such a move, those interviewed said.

The meeting here took place the day after what appeared to have been an attack by a suicide bomber at an Internet cafe in central Kabul. A United Nations engineer from Myanmar was among three people killed in the bombing, a United Nations spokeswoman said Sunday. The two other victims were Afghans, one of them probably the bomber. Five others, including an American of Afghan descent, were injured.

[On Sunday, United States forces tracked down a band of insurgents in eastern Afghanistan, setting off a battle in which two marines were killed, the military said Monday, according to The Associated Press. The clash was in Laghman Province, an opium-producing region where American forces regularly battle militants.]
At the meeting on Sunday, Mr. Karzai listened to delegates of the two grand councils held since he took power as well as to tribal elders and political party leaders ahead of visits he plans this month to Europe and the United States. He will discuss the subject of continued support from the NATO-led International Security and Assistance Force and the American-led force.

There is no Status of Forces Agreement between Afghanistan and the United States to regulate the presence of the 17,000 American troops in Afghanistan, and the issue has been increasingly debated as the parliamentary elections, scheduled for Sept. 18, draw closer.

Mr. Ludin said that the timetable laid out for Afghanistan at the United Nations-sponsored conference in Bonn in 2001 covered the presence of international bodies and American troops until the elections, but that thereafter a new legal framework would have to be established to regulate their presence.

Mr. Karzai has said that he wants a long-term strategic partnership with the United States that goes beyond the presence of American military bases here and that will ensure a continued commitment to Afghanistan's security and development.

"At some point we are going to want to define the relationship," Michael Macey, a spokesman at the United States Embassy, said. The responsibilities of the American military, the freedom of the troops and how long they remain are all issues to be defined, he said. "We have a commitment and expect to maintain a commitment," he said.