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President Bush in Afghanistan



U.S. President George W. Bush with President Hamid Karzai at the Presidential Palace in Kabul on March 1. Bush stopped for an unscheduled five-hour visit to Afghanistan while on his way the India on his maiden trip to South Asia.

U.S. President George W. Bush on March 1 made a surprise visit to Afghanistan and lauded the nascent democratic steps taken by the country.

Bush, who toured the Bagram base where a majority of the American soldiers are stationed and inaugurated a new American Embassy building, addressed a joint press conference with President Hamid Karzai at the Presidential palace.

Welcoming Bush, Karzai, who described the President's visit as a "wonderful moment", said: "We owe a great, great deal in this country's rebuilding — peace, democracy, the strong steps toward the future — to your support, to your leadership, to the American people, and to the way you have given your hand to the Afghan people."

President Bush, who had a one-on-one meeting with Karzai earlier, said it was America's "pleasure and honor to be involved with the future of this country".

The U.S. President lauded the "progress" Afghanistan was making as a democracy, saying: "We like stories of young girls going to school for the first time so they can realise their potential. We appreciate a free press.

We are enthralled when we see an entrepreneurial class grow up where people are able to work and realise their dreams. We understand the importance of having a well-trained military dedicated to the sovereignty of the country and to the peace of the people.

We're impressed by the progress that your country is making."

Underlining the importance of the move toward democracy in Afghanistan, Bush said: "People all over the world are watching the experience here in Afghanistan. I hope the people of Afghanistan understand that as democracy takes hold, you're inspiring others. And that inspiration will cause others to demand their freedom. And as the world becomes more free, the world will become more peaceful."

President Bush also stressed that Iran must not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons because that would be the "most destabilising thing" to happen in the region and the world.

In their talks, Bush and Karzai reportedly discussed operations against militants in Afghanistan and reconstruction of the war-ravaged country. The U.S. has the largest contingent of troops in Afghanistan with 19,000 soldiers, but it wants to gradually reduce its forces in the south to about 3,000. The International Security Assistance Force is to take more responsibility in the south.

President Bush's brief visit to Afghanistan was not announced ahead of schedule because of security concerns.

Afghanistan 'will always remember that in their hour of need, India stood by them'

"The world has benefitted from the example of India's democracy, and now the world needs India's leadership in freedom's cause. As a global power, India has an historic duty to support democracy around the world. In Afghanistan... the world is beginning to see what India's leadership can accomplish. Since the Taliban was removed from power, India has pledged \$565 million to help the Afghan people to get back on their feet. Your country has trained National Assembly staff, and developing a similar program for the Assembly's elected leaders. You recently announced that you'll provide an additional \$50 million to help the Afghans complete their National Assembly building. After so many years of suffering, the Afghan people are reclaiming a future of hope and freedom, and they will always remember that in their hour of need, India stood with them."

— U.S. President George W. Bush, on Indian aid to Afghanistan