

Karzai focuses on peace at HT Leadership Summit

There is an immediate need to focus on the fight against extremism — religious extremism and extremism of ideology — and to put an end to the use of terrorism as state policy for this region to realise its full potential, said Afghan President Hamid Karzai, addressing the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit on 'India the Next Global Superpower?' in New Delhi on November 18. The visionary President has the road for his country mapped and his dream of a new world painted in colours of peace and synergy.

"This region has a youthful population, an educated population, the best growing economies in the world — China and India," said Karzai, asking in the same breath, "So what is preventing us from moving ahead?"

Karzai answered that question himself. "Some of us are using extremism as a necessary means of policy," he said.

Things will begin to improve dramatically, the Afghanistan President said, as soon as an end is put to both the use of terror as part of the state policy and its tolerance.

In a question-and-answer session following his address, the President was asked about Osama bin Laden and whether he was still in Pakistan as he had once believed. He said: "If he has not run away, he must be in that region."

The overall thrust of Karzai's address was essentially that Afghanistan is managing with the help of the rest of the world — he calls it "cooperation of civilisations" — and that for the region to prosper, extremism and terror must be checked and rooted out on priority.

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President Hamid Karzai during his address at the Hindustan Times Leadership Summit in New Delhi on November 18.

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because of extremism — most of it imported from outside — and because the problem

was ignored, repercussions were felt as far away as in New York and the rest of the world.

"Before September 11, Afghanistan did not matter," Karzai said, adding, "We did not have anything to buy from anyone or give anything to anyone." And then came the wake-up call from Afghanistan.

But things have improved tremendously since the overthrow of the Taliban, the President said.

He reeled out figures to illustrate his point. "Afghanistan's trade with its neighbours stands at \$2.5 billion; imports from Pakistan used to be \$25 million, it is worth \$1.3 billion now."

To a question on the destroyed statues of Buddha at Bamiyan, Karzai said, "I am not able to decide whether something can be done to restore them. The originals were carved into the mountain. And that does not seem possible now."

When asked if he would agree to speak to Mullah Omar, the Taliban chief, he said he was willing to speak to anyone for the sake of peace in Afghanistan.

"But people who have committed crimes against the people of Afghanistan must face a court of law," the Afghan President made it clear.

"We are willing to speak to the Afghan Taliban," the President said, adding, "but not to non-Afghan Taliban."

Karzai said he believed that the original Taliban were simple people, who emerged as a force to reckon with in the country. "But soon, they were being used by a more clever and better-equipped lot." And these clever people were outsiders, not Afghans, the President said. ■

Greater Indian investment is sought for Afghanistan

Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai has urged Indian Inc. to invest in his country and utilise the tremendous opportunities in sectors such as energy, transportation, financial services and construction, among others.

"I am here to call for investors to come to Afghanistan," Karzai said while addressing a meeting organised by leading industry chambers in New Delhi on November 18.

The Afghan President was accompanied by a 75-member delegation. Admitting that there was still a lot of red-tapism and government control over industry, Karzai said:

"We have created an Afghanistan investment support agency to facilitate faster clearances.

"Our country is definitely peaking in business and there are several opportunities," he said, pointing out that Kabul was soon going to finalise several projects, including a deal for copper mining.

Referring to the Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan pipeline project that India is likely to join, the President said there was a lot of interest in the U.A.E. to join the venture as well.

He said there were opportunities for Indian private airlines to set up operations in

his country and give competition to the national airlines of both countries.

Karzai promised to look into Indian industry leaders' request for visa on arrival for businessman and tourists and study the possibility of a better road link between the two countries.

There are around 120 Indian entities operating in Afghanistan and around 2,000 Indians engaged in developmental projects there. The trade between the two countries has grown in the last four years to \$200 million, with exports from Kabul accounting for \$50 million. ■