

President Hamid Karzai 'praised' for UN expulsions

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The two senior international officials expelled by the Afghan Government flew out of Kabul yesterday, leaving behind a mood of simmering hostility between Afghan officials, who accuse them of backing the Taliban, and foreign diplomats, who are furious about their treatment.

As they departed for Pakistan, new claims emerged about a supposed meeting the pair held with the Taliban's leaders in the town of Musa Qala in Helmand province only days after British troops had recaptured the town earlier this month.

Afghan officials have claimed the pair were acting well beyond their brief and even paid money to the guerrillas. The UN has insisted that they met tribal leaders only during a routine fact-finding mission.

Michael Semple, an Irishman and EU official with extensive Taliban contacts, and Mervyn Patterson, a UN official from Northern Ireland, are considered to be two of the leading experts on Afghanistan.

Aleem Siddique, a spokesman for the UN, said: "We are now trying to negotiate their swift return to Afghanistan." He said that the UN needed "to speak to people on the ground" but denied that the men had been speaking to terrorists.

The duo's trip to Helmand, which was made with British military assistance, was to an area where links with the Taliban are essential to survive, and was made at a time when the British military is attempting to "peel off" enemy fighters from the insurgency by persuading them to defect.

The operation to retake Musa Qala was started after Mullah Abdul Salam, an important Taliban commander, switched sides with his men, and more defections are hoped for.

Although the large international community in Kabul has been aghast at the men's expulsion, the move has won the praise of many Afghans unhappy with the role foreigners play in their country. There is growing frustration at the slow pace of reconstruction and the deteriorating security, and many Afghans fear that foreign powers may be willing to do deals with guerrillas in order to get out.

Diplomats' efforts to enable the return of the two men face a protracted wrangle, according to sources in Kabul. The problem has been complicated by President Karzai's absence on a trip to Pakistan until today, when he is due to award a medal for services to Afghanistan to Tom Koenigs, the UN's Special Representative in the country.

Zabihullah Mujahed, a spokesman for the Taleban, phoned the AFP news agency from a secret location and said: "This is a drama by Karzai's administration trying to show off that they are independent. We're amazed why Karzai would show sensitivity to the fact they have met with the Taleban while he himself publicly says he is ready to meet the Taleban."

The President's decision to expel the pair apparently came after Assadullah Wafa, the Governor of Helmand, complained to him that they had made the trip without telling him, and alleged that they were trying to make a deal with the Taleban behind the back of the Government.

Yesterday Governor Wafa held a press conference in which he said that he had information that the two men had met the Taleban, who were planning suicide bomb attacks against Afghan security forces. Tolo TV, which has dubbed the affair "Helmand-gate", claimed that the officials were found with \$150,000 (£75,000) in cash and had information on a laptop suggesting that they had previously paid the Taleban leaders.