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PROFILE: HAMID KARZAI

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Hamid Karzai, a 44-year-old Pashtun tribal leader, was sworn in Dec. 22 to lead Afghanistan's interim government -- the country's first official post-Taliban ruling body.

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Karzai has spent much of his life fighting what he characterizes as "foreign influences" in Afghanistan.

He first rose to preeminence fighting the Soviet invasion in the early 1980s. As a member of the Mujahideen, he helped organize one of the largest Pashtun tribes, the Popolzai, headed by his father.

Karzai's work, based in Pakistan, made him a staunch nationalist bent on forcing out neighboring nations that he felt were using Afghanistan for their own purposes.

"If the foreign intervention does not stop in Afghanistan from all around, terrorism will not end in Afghanistan," he recently told a reporter for the Australian Broadcasting Company.

Following the Soviet pullout, Karzai returned and joined the rebel government of Northern Alliance leader Burhanuddin Rabbani in 1992. He served as the deputy foreign minister, but internal divisions and bickering crippled the new state.

The fighting within the new government spilled over to the streets of Kabul. Violence spread and within a few years, 50,000 Afghans had been killed and major sections of Kabul destroyed.

When the Taliban first began to emerge in the early 1990s, Karzai supported them. A native of the region around Kandahar, he saw the Taliban as a force that could finally end the violence.

But as the fundamentalist group gained power, Karzai became suspicious of the Taliban, saying it was too influenced by foreign groups.

In 1995, the Taliban approached Karzai, hoping to have the influential tribesman join their effort. They offered him the position of U.N. ambassador in a new Taliban government, but he refused, telling friends he felt the Pakistan intelligence service was in control of the group.

No longer welcome in Afghanistan after the Taliban solidified control in 1996, Karzai fled. But the violence of

Afghanistan still pursued him. In 1999, Karzai's father was gunned down as he returned home from prayers in the Pakistani city of Quetta. Reports attributed the slaying to the Taliban.

As the U.S. prepared for airstrikes against the Taliban, Karzai urged the allied nations to purge the nation of foreign and al-Qaida terrorists.

"These Arabs, together with their foreign supporters and the Taliban, destroyed miles and miles of homes and orchards and vineyards," he told BBC. "They have killed Afghans. They have trained their guns on Afghan lives... We want them out."

After the bombing began, Karzai slipped back into Afghanistan to help organize anti-Taliban forces among the ethnic Pashtun tribes of the south.

Karzai will now head the effort to build political peace in Afghanistan. As a member of the same Pashtun tribe as the exiled king and the former Rabbani government, the delegates to the U.N.-sponsored talks hope Karzai can bring unity to the nation.

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