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Queen honours Afghan leader with knighthood

BY PA NEWS

President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan was awarded an honorary knighthood by the Queen today - a token of friendship and measure of his importance to Britain.

In a ceremony at Windsor Castle, the Queen handed Mr Karzai the insignia of a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, a senior knighthood.

Flattered, the President of Afghanistan's Transitional Authority was profuse with his thanks. As the Queen presented him with the honour, which was recommended by Tony Blair, she said: "This is a token of friendship."

Mr Karzai, who as a foreign national should not use the title "Sir", asked if he could wear the insignia. "Do I get to wear this on my jacket some time?"

The Queen replied: "We can sometimes arrange that."

Earlier Mr Karzai said that Osama bin Laden was "probably" alive and the West could still be vulnerable to September 11-style attacks.

Speaking during an official visit to London, he said that although Afghanistan was now free of al-Qaeda operatives, no nation had the ability to stop an individual carrying out a terrorist attack. He told BBC Radio: "In Afghanistan they still can have a gun and come and kill common people. Do we have the capability to stop that? Does any nation have the capability to stop that? No.

"But can they operate in large groups? Can they have other similar activities that would take an organised form of large people? No they cannot do that any more. That's gone."

Mr Karzai said that he had "no idea" where Osama bin Laden was, adding: "There are signs that he's alive. There are also signs that he's not alive, now we don't know.

"The evidence is that they (al-Qaeda) are no longer in Afghanistan. The evidence is that they no longer control territory. The evidence is that they are on the run, they are hiding.

"A hiding person is not a victorious person."

Mr Karzai has called on the international community to give his country \$15-20 billion (£9-12 billion) to help with reconstruction. "If you have a prosperous nation, if you have a nation ... that gets some bread and butter of its own making, then terrorism and al-Qaeda and all sorts of other nasty elements will have no room to operate in Afghanistan.

"Also the farmers that are growing poppies now would not need to go to drug production in Afghanistan."

Later Mr Karzai was due to address a VIP audience at the Middle East Centre, Saint Anthony's College, Oxford University, about Afghanistan's chequered history.

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