

Afghanistan says no return for expelled foreign officials

** Official says expulsion a message that the govt is 'watching everyone'*

KABUL: The Afghan government Tuesday defended its decision to expel two foreign officials over national security charges, saying "no way is left open" for the pair's return to the strife-torn country.

The government last week expelled two Westerners - the second most senior European Union official in Afghanistan and a top UN political advisor - accusing them of threatening national security. The UN dismissed the charges as a "misunderstanding" and hoped the pair would be cleared of the allegations.

But the Afghan government is not backing down. "The government's definite decision is that the two individuals have... been expelled... and no way is left open for their return," President Hamid Karzai's senior spokesman, Homayun Hamidzada, told reporters in Kabul. Kabul has said the two expelled officials - Irish national Michael Semple, working for the EU, and Briton Mervyn Patterson - made contact with the Taliban during visits to the southern province of Helmand, a rebel stronghold.

Hamidzada would not provide details but said: "The two individuals were involved in activities that were not consistent with their original jobs and they had engaged in unauthorised activities."

'Watching everyone': The spokesman said the expulsion of the two - both key figures in the international deployment here - was sending a message that the US-backed government of Karzai was "watching everyone." "This sends a message that the Afghanistan government is watching everyone and any unauthorised activities... will be stopped," he added. The UN has been involved in post-Taliban Afghanistan for the past six years.

The EU has also played a role in major development projects here. Hamidzada said the expulsions would not affect relations between the two bodies and Karzai's government, which largely relies on international aid to stand on its own feet after decades of conflicts. afp

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