

Taliban is winning Afghan war, says Zardari

Alex Barker and Farhan Bokhari

Asif Ali Zardari, Pakistan's president, gave warning on Tuesday that Nato forces are "losing the war against the Taliban" in Afghanistan as he arrived in London for a "frank discussion" with David Cameron on terrorism.

Mr Zardari's remarks on the "grip of the Taliban strengthening" sets the stage for a crunch meeting with the prime minister on Friday, bringing to a head a week of rising diplomatic tensions.

During a stop-off in Paris, Mr Zardari said he planned to put Mr Cameron straight and quell a "serious crisis" in relations – even as the prime minister insisted that he had no regrets over claiming Pakistan "looked both ways" on terrorism.

The diplomatic row is playing out against the backdrop of rising calls for Mr Zardari to cancel his trip and return to Pakistan, both to send a message of dismay to London and to show respect to the victims of the worst floods in Pakistan since 1929.

Meanwhile, Mr Cameron endured a fresh barrage of criticism from both left and right over his sharp public criticisms of Pakistan, which Lord Tebbit, the former Tory chairman, described as "sloppy, slap-happy government".

The concerns were echoed by Sir Menzies Campbell, the former Liberal Democrat leader, who suggested using the aid budget to "get back on good terms" with Islamabad. "It is not in our interests to be at loggerheads with a country that is so important to the outcome in Afghanistan," he said.

Giving a flavour of the concerns he will raise with Mr Cameron, Mr Zardari told Le Monde that Nato was "in the process of losing the war against the Taliban".

"That is, above all, because we have lost the battle for hearts and minds ... The whole approach seems wrong to me," he said. "The population does not associate the presence of the coalition with a better future."

Turning to Mr Cameron's specific comments on Pakistan "exporting terror", Mr Zardari said he would make clear that it was Pakistan "paying the highest price for this war in terms of human lives".

"A frank discussion will allow us to reintroduce a little bit of calm," he added. "Relations between our two countries are old and solid enough for that."

In spite of the furore sparked by his remarks, Mr Cameron is standing firm on his criticisms, insisting he "gave a pretty clear and frank answer" and did not "regret that at all".

Pakistan's main opposition party said on Tuesday night it would "extensively debate" Mr Zardari's trip in the lower house of parliament, piling pressure on the president to take a tough line with Mr Cameron.

Criticism of Mr Zardari mounted after reports that the president was using his visit to launch the political career of his 21-year-old son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, during a political rally in Birmingham.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, Aug 3rd 2010, World, online.