

US has no Afghan exit strategy: Holbrooke

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WASHINGTON: Ahead of the NATO Summit in Lisbon next week, a top Obama administration official Wednesday asserted the US had “no exit strategy” for Afghanistan, and instead a “transition strategy” would be unveiled in the Portuguese capital.

There would be a gradual drawdown of forces beginning in July 2011, but its scope, pace, timing and size would be determined by the circumstances, US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke told a group of reporters writing for media outlets in the two countries.

“I would urge you to focus more on the transition policy that is evolving and which will be unveiled in the Lisbon Summit next week, where we are going to focus on an orderly process on the next four years, in which international combat troops would be gradually replaced by local Afghan security forces,”

After 2014 there would still be a continuing international presence on economic and security assistance, Holbrooke said, explaining the transition strategy would take a number of years.

President Karzai has said by the end of 2014, his government and security forces would be ready to take over responsibility for their own security, with international support.

“That gives us four years. I think that you will see formally enshrined in the NATO declaration in Lisbon the end of next week. You will find that in the next four years there will be a very heavy emphasis on training, equipping and supporting police and the Army and continuing our military operations,” he added.

After 2014, the diplomat continued, the international community was not going to be leaving Afghanistan. It would remain there with economic and security assistance and continued efforts in regard to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Holbrooke maintained.

America’s point man for Afghanistan and Pakistan said the yearly review of the Af-Pak policy would not result in any “major changes” in the Obama administration’s policy towards the region.

“We are going to go over every aspect of the policy. What we have accomplished in the last year, what we could have done better, and the problems ahead. It is not going to result in a major change in American policy. Let’s be very clear that the December review is not going to be a moment for major change,” he said.

Holbrooke, who is headed to Islamabad to represent the United States at the Pakistan Development Forum meeting, said the next round of tri-lateral talks among the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan would be held early next year.

He will be talking to Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi about when and where they can best do that in the first quarter of next year. Afghan Foreign Minister Dr. Zalmay Rasoul will be in Washington next Tuesday and Wednesday to meet him and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Holbrooke

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