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America Will Take No Prisoners

by Ian Cobain in Konduz Province and Damian Whitworth in Washington

AMERICAN forces attacking Taleban fighters in Afghanistan are under orders to take no prisoners, the US Defense Secretary said last night.

Donald Rumsfeld also ruled out suggestions that thousands of al-Qaeda mercenaries trapped in the northern city of Konduz might be allowed to negotiate safe passage to a third country, and said that America would do all in its power to stop Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taleban leader, fleeing Afghanistan.

“The United States is not inclined to negotiate surrenders, nor are we in a position, with relatively small numbers of forces on the ground, to accept prisoners,” he said.

Mr Rumsfeld was responding to attempts by opposition forces to negotiate a peaceful end to the siege of Konduz. General Mohammad Dawood Khan, commanding the Northern Alliance forces that face the Taleban on three sides of the city, told *The Times*: “If a country accepted them as refugees, we would have no problem, they can go free. We have been in contact with the UN over this.”

The deal is being discussed to avoid massive bloodshed during any attempt to take the city by force. Up to 30,000 troops, including up to 10,000 foreign fighters, are encircled in Konduz, the last outpost of Taleban resistance in the north of Afghanistan.

The prospect of giving safe passage to large numbers of fundamentalists alarms Washington because they would be expected to regroup and possibly wage guerrilla war against whatever government may be established in Kabul, or to plot further terrorists attacks.

Mr Rumsfeld said: “Any idea that those people in that town who have been fighting so viciously and who refuse to surrender should end up in some sort of a negotiation which would allow them to leave the country and go off and destabilize other countries and engage in terrorist attacks on the United States is something that I would certainly do everything I could to prevent. They’re people who have done terrible things.”

The US was not prepared to negotiate with the Taleban or al-Qaeda’s foreign forces, he added. “It’s our hope that they will not engage in negotiations that would provide for the release of al-Qaeda forces.

“The idea of their getting out of the country and going off to make their mischief somewhere else is not a happy prospect. So my hope is that they will either be killed or taken prisoner (by the Northern Alliance).” Mr Rumsfeld would not say if US forces would pursue al-Qaeda over borders, but said “We might have an early, intensive consultation with the neighbors.”

He also ruled out the possibility of Mullah Omar being allowed to find a safe exit from Kandahar. “Would I knowingly let him get out of Kandahar? No I would not,” he said.

Under the terms being negotiated by the Alliance, thousands of foreigners loyal to bin Laden — including Pakistanis, Chechens and Arabs — would be allowed to scramble to freedom as refugees to another country, possibly Pakistan.

The alternative appears to be a battle in which fanatical foreign fundamentalists might take a heavy toll on the city’s 200,000-plus inhabitants as well as on the Alliance forces.

Mr Rumsfeld’s words will strain fragile relations between the US and the Northern Alliance, the coalition’s nominal allies in Afghanistan, at a time when growing divisions are emerging

between Washington and London over the role of British troops.

Defense sources in London said the deployment of thousands of British forces to Afghanistan was being delayed because Washington was more concerned with hunting bin Laden than with establishing a peace-support force.

Although the Northern Alliance had objected to the deployment of a large "foreign" force, the sources said that the impasse "had more to do with Washington than Kabul".

While denying suggestions of a rift between President Bush and Mr Blair, officials hinted that the deployment was not happening as quickly as Britain would like. Downing Street insisted, however, that more British forces would be on their way before long.

On the fate of Taleban fighters in Konduz, government sources declined to comment publicly, but ministers voiced strong misgivings about the suggestion that al-Qaeda members should be allowed to escape. One said: "We don't want to see a slaughter, but equally we do not want these people allowed to go free. It is quite possible that there are future bin Ladens trapped in Konduz. This is not the time to let them go."

Pakistan said It would not allow a safe passage into the country to any fighters from Afghanistan and It has put border troops on the highest alert.

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