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## **AFGHANISTAN SAYS TO SIGN PEACE DEAL WITH WARLORD HEKMATYAR**

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Afghan authorities will sign a peace accord on Thursday with Hezb-e-Islami of Afghanistan, a party led by one of the country's most prominent Islamist warlords, the government's media office said.

The long-expected deal with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a veteran of almost 40 years of fighting in Afghanistan, follows months of negotiations aimed at bringing his group, which has long been allied with the Taliban and al Qaeda, into the political fold.

The accord, which officials say was largely concluded at the weekend after a preliminary deal in May, will be formally signed at a ceremony at the office of the High Peace Council at 1100 a.m (0730 British time), the government media office said.

Hekmatyar has been accused of serious human rights abuses, notably during the 1990s civil war, when his forces were blamed for heavy bombardments of Kabul that killed thousands, but he has played little direct part in the insurgency in recent years.

However, after the repeated failure to start peace talks with the Taliban, the accord offers some hope that the Kabul government can persuade other militant groups to leave the battlefield and join a peaceful political process.

The United States had welcomed signs of an agreement with Hezb-e-Islami and earlier this year, after the preliminary accord was signed, the State Department said it hoped a final agreement would help to end violence in Afghanistan.

According to Afghan media, the agreement will grant Hekmatyar amnesty for past offences and the release of certain Hezb-i-Islami prisoners. The Kabul government also agreed to press for the lifting of international sanctions on Hekmatyar.

But many, particularly among the supporters of President Ashraf Ghani's reluctant partner in government, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, have had deep reservations about concluding an agreement with a Pashtun warlord of such prominence.

Abdullah's mainly Tajik supporters have been alarmed by the prospect of a powerful Pashtun bloc upsetting the uneasy equilibrium that has held since the disputed 2014 election was resolved with the creation of a national unity government.

Many activists have also been sharply critical of concluding an agreement with a leader who is accused of serious human rights abuses.

Allied at various times with the anti-Soviet mujahideen, Pakistan, al Qaeda and the Taliban, Hekmatyar was included on the U.S. State Department's Specially Designated Global Terrorist list in 2003.

He is believed to command several hundred fighters linked to several attacks on international and Afghan government forces.

Despite the controversy over Hekmatyar, other former warlords, notably Vice President Rashid Dostum and second Chief Executive Mohammad Mohaqiq, have also faced accusations of rights abuses and have still been included in the government.

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