UNCLASSIFIED U.S. Department of State Case No. F-2014-20439 Doc No. C05761120 Date: 06/30/2015

RELEASE IN FULL

From:

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Sent:

Saturday, May 02, 2009 7:30 AM

To:

H2

Subject:

Fyi before karzai call

This news just broke. Karzai call is at noon.

Challenger withdraws from race to unseat Afghan president

KABUL (Reuters) – One of the top candidates expected to bid to unseat Afghan President Karzai withdrew abruptly from the election race, dealing a blow to opposition hopes of fielding a contender with a broad enough base to win.

Gul Agha Sherzai, popular governor of Nangarhar Province and a former anti-Soviet guerrilla commander, had been in talks to head up a broad opposition ticket with two vice presidential candidates that would span ethnic lines.

But he told a news conference that he had met Karzai and had been persuaded not to run.