

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/04/world/asia/karzai-has-held-secret-contacts-with-the-taliban.html?hpw&_r=0

Karzai Arranged Secret Contacts With the Taliban

By AZAM AHMED and MATTHEW ROSENBERGFEB.

2/3/2014

President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan has refused to sign a deal he brokered for security after Western troops leave. Mauricio Lima for The New York Times

KABUL, Afghanistan — President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan has been engaged in secret contacts with the Taliban about reaching a peace agreement without the involvement of his American and Western allies, further corroding already strained relations with the United States.

The secret contacts appear to help explain a string of actions by Mr. Karzai that seem intended to antagonize his American backers, Western and Afghan officials said. In recent weeks, Mr. Karzai has continued to refuse to sign a long-term security agreement with Washington that he negotiated, insisted on releasing hardened Taliban militants from prison and distributed distorted evidence of what he called American war crimes.

The clandestine contacts with the Taliban have borne little fruit, according to people who have been told about them. But they have helped undermine the remaining confidence between the United States and Mr. Karzai, making the already messy endgame of the Afghan conflict even more volatile. Support for the war effort in Congress has deteriorated sharply, and American officials say they are uncertain whether they can maintain even minimal security cooperation with Mr. Karzai's government or its successor after coming elections.

A convoy with Afghan National Army troops. American forces are turning over their combat role to Afghan forces. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Frustrated by Mr. Karzai's refusal to sign the security agreement, which would clear the way for American troops to stay on for training and counterterrorism work after the end of the year, President Obama has summoned his top commanders to the White House on Tuesday to consider the future of the American mission in Afghanistan.

Western and Afghan officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the private nature of the peace contacts, said that the outreach was apparently initiated by the Taliban in November, a time of deepening mistrust between Mr. Karzai and his allies. Mr. Karzai seemed to jump at what he believed was a chance to achieve what the Americans were unwilling or unable to do, and reach a deal to end the conflict — a belief that few in his camp shared.

The peace contacts, though, have yielded no tangible agreement, nor even progressed as far as opening negotiations for one. And it is not clear whether the Taliban ever intended to seriously pursue negotiations, or were simply trying to derail the security agreement by distracting Mr. Karzai and leading him on, as many of the officials said they suspected.

As recently as October, a long-term agreement between the United States and Afghanistan seemed to be only a few formalities away from completion, after a special visit by Secretary of State John Kerry. The terms were settled, and a loya jirga, or assembly of prominent Afghans, that the president summoned to ratify the deal gave its approval. The continued presence of American troops after 2014, not to mention billions of dollars in aid, depended on the president's signature. But Mr. Karzai repeatedly balked, perplexing Americans and many Afghans alike.

Peace Contacts Fade

The first peace feeler from the Taliban reached Mr. Karzai shortly before the loya jirga, Afghan officials said, and since then the insurgents and the government have exchanged a flurry of messages and contacts.

Aimal Faizi, the spokesman for Mr. Karzai, acknowledged the secret contacts with the Taliban and said they were continuing.

“The last two months have been very positive,” Mr. Faizi said. He characterized the contacts as among the most serious the presidential palace has had since the war began. “These parties were encouraged by the president's stance on the bilateral security agreement and his speeches afterwards,” he said.

But other Afghan and Western officials said that the contacts had fizzled, and that whatever the Taliban may have intended at the outset, they no longer had any intention of negotiating with the Afghan government. They said that top Afghan officials had met with influential Taliban leaders in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in recent weeks, and were told that any prospects of a peace deal were now gone.

The Afghan and Western officials questioned whether the interlocutors whom Mr. Karzai was in contact with had connections to the Taliban movement's leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, whose blessing would be needed for any peace deal the group were to strike.

Though there have been informal contacts between Afghan officials and Taliban leaders since the very early days of the war, the insurgents' opaque and secretive leaders have made their intentions difficult to discern. Afghan officials have struggled in recent years to find genuine Taliban representatives, and have flitted among a variety of current and former insurgent leaders, most of whom had only tenuous connections to Mullah Omar and his inner circle, American and Afghan officials have said.

Western Outreach

The only known genuine negotiating channel to those leaders was developed by American and German diplomats, who spent roughly two years trying to open peace talks in Qatar. The diplomats repeatedly found themselves incurring the wrath of Mr. Karzai, who saw the effort as an attempt to circumvent him; he tried behind the scenes to undercut it.

Then, when an American diplomatic push led to the opening of a Taliban office in Qatar, Mr. Karzai lashed out publicly at the United States. Afghan officials said that to them, the office looked far too much like the embassy of a government-in-exile, with its own flag and a nameplate reading "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." Within days, the Qatar initiative stalled, and Mr. Karzai was fuming at what he saw as a plot by the United States to cut its own deal with Pakistan and the Taliban without him.

In the wake of the failure in Qatar, Afghan officials redoubled their efforts to open their own channel to Mullah Omar, and by late autumn, Mr. Karzai apparently believed those efforts were succeeding. Some senior Afghan officials say they did not share his confidence, and their doubts were shared by American officials in Kabul and Washington.

Both Mr. Karzai and American officials hear the clock ticking. American forces are turning over their combat role to Afghan forces and preparing to leave Afghanistan this year, and the campaigning for the Afghan national election in April has begun. An orderly transition of power in an Afghanistan that can contain the insurgency on its own would be the culmination of everything that the United States has tried to achieve in the country.

"We've been through numerous cycles of ups and downs in our relations with President Karzai over the years," Ambassador James B. Cunningham said during a briefing with reporters last week. "What makes it a little different this time is that he is coming to the end of his presidency, and we have some very important milestones for the international community and for Afghanistan coming up in the next couple of months."

The only people who fall for this guy are the President and the former and current Secretaries of State plus we are rebuilding Afghanistan...

Mr. Karzai has been increasingly concerned with his legacy, officials say. When discussing the impasse with the Americans, he has repeatedly alluded to his country's troubled history as a lesson in dealing with foreign powers. He recently likened the security agreement to the Treaty of Gandamak, a one-sided 1879 agreement that ceded frontier lands to the British administration in India and gave it tacit control over Afghan foreign policy. He has publicly assailed American policies as the behavior of a "colonial power," though diplomats and military officials say he has been more cordial in private.

Mr. Karzai reacted angrily to a negative portrayal of him in a recent memoir by the former Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, and he is still bitter over the 2009 presidential election, when hundreds of thousands of fraudulent ballots were disqualified and, as he sees it, the Americans forced him into an unnecessary runoff against his closest opponent.

In some respects, Mr. Karzai's outbursts have been an effort to speak to Afghans who want him to take a hard line against the Americans, including many ethnic Pashtuns, who make up nearly all of the Taliban. With the American-led coalition on its way out and American influence waning, Mr. Karzai is more concerned with bridging the chasms of Afghan domestic politics than with his foreign allies' interests.

If the peace overture to the Taliban is indeed at an end, as officials believe, it is unclear what Mr. Karzai will do next. He could return to a softer stance on the security agreement and less hostility toward the United States, or he could justify his refusal to sign the agreement by blaming the Americans for failing to secure a genuine negotiation with the insurgents.

Mr. Karzai has insisted that he will not sign the agreement unless the Americans help bring the Taliban to the table for peace talks. Some diplomats worry that making such a demand allows the Taliban to dictate the terms of America's long-term presence in Afghanistan. Others question Mr. Karzai's logic: Why would the insurgency agree to talks if doing so would ensure the presence of the foreign troops it is determined to expel?

The White House expressed impatience on Monday with Mr. Karzai's refusal to sign the agreement. "The longer there is a delay, the harder it is for NATO and U.S. military forces to plan for a post-2014 presence," said Jay Carney, the White House press secretary. "This is a matter of weeks, not months."

51Comments

The military leaders expected to attend the planning conference at the White House on Tuesday include Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the commander of American forces in Afghanistan; Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, the former Iraq commander now serving as head of the United States Central Command; and Adm. William H. McRaven, head of the United States Special Operations Command.

In recent statements, Mr. Karzai's office in Kabul has appeared to open the door to a resolution of the impasse over the security agreement. The presidential spokesman, Mr. Faizi, has said that

if one party is obstructing the American efforts to get talks going, the United States need only say so publicly.

“Once there is clarity, we can take the next step to signing” the agreement, he said.