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Exclusive: Secret meetings in Pakistan expose obstacles to Afghan peace talks

By Jibran Ahmad and Mehreen Zahra-Malik

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Days after word leaked that the Afghan Taliban had signaled willingness to enter talks to end Afghanistan's long war, senior representatives of the militant group visited Islamabad for secret discussions on the next step forward.

They left with a blunt message from Pakistan: the Taliban must end a rift between two top leaders, or talks might never get off the ground.

The warning was a reminder of how tough it will be to get insurgents and the Afghan government around the same table, let alone agree a lasting peace, even with help from Pakistan, the Taliban's erstwhile backer that still wields influence over them.

The two senior Taliban figures in question are political leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who favors negotiation, and battlefield commander Abdul Qayum Zakir, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, who opposes talks with Kabul.

Mansour and Zakir, long-time rivals, met recently to resolve their personal differences, slaughtering sheep for a feast to mark the occasion, according to two Taliban sources.

But Mansour was unable to persuade Zakir to reverse his opposition to direct talks with Kabul, which he sees as "wasting time" because the United States holds real power in Afghanistan, the sources added.

The latest peace initiative, considered more promising than recent doomed efforts because of Pakistani and Chinese mediation, is aimed at ending an escalating conflict in which hundreds of Afghans are killed every month.

The potential breakthrough comes after foreign combat troops withdrew at the end of 2014, leaving a smaller training force of about 12,000.

SECRECACY AND DENIALS

Many obstacles to peace remain. Both sides are deeply suspicious and the Taliban are expected to demand the immediate withdrawal of the remaining foreign troops, a request Afghan President Ashraf Ghani appears sure to reject.

Still, the process is at least moving, according to several Taliban sources in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as senior Pakistani and Afghan officials.

This week, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Daniel Feldman, made an unannounced visit to Islamabad to discuss the possibility of talks, the Pakistani army said.

And in late February, a delegation led by Qari Din Mohammad Hanif of the Taliban's political office in Qatar met in Islamabad with Pakistani army leaders and Chinese diplomats, according to two Taliban commanders and two senior Pakistani officials.

The Taliban's official spokesman denied the visit took place. China's foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei said reports its diplomats in Islamabad met with Taliban representatives "do not accord with reality".

A U.S. government official said Feldman was in Pakistan as part of a business delegation, adding Washington had encouraged Pakistan and China to support Ghani's reconciliation efforts.

According to two senior insurgent commanders with direct knowledge of the Taliban delegation's visit to Islamabad, the group then traveled on to Quetta, the southwestern Pakistani city where many Taliban leaders remain in hiding, to brief them on the preliminary discussions.

"They said Pakistani officials had advised them to remove our internal differences before starting formal talks with Kabul," one of the Taliban commanders said by telephone.

Because Zakir holds sway over several thousand fighters in eastern Afghanistan, it is uncertain any ceasefire could hold were he to continue opposing direct talks with Kabul.

The verdict of Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban's reclusive supreme leader, could prove key, if it comes.

He has not been seen in public since the U.S.-sponsored toppling of the Taliban after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

SEARCHING FOR "MIDDLE GROUND"

Some experts are more hopeful of progress this time around because of a Pakistani threat to arrest or expel Taliban leaders if they do not negotiate with Kabul.

That could force the Afghan Taliban to cut ties with al Qaeda and the separate Pakistani Taliban, or TTP.

Renewed Pakistani pressure on the Afghan Taliban was galvanized by the TTP's massacre of 132 students in December at an army-run school in the Pakistani city of Peshawar.

In return for Pakistani support for talks, Afghanistan has targeted TTP strongholds in its eastern Kunar province, near the Pakistan border - an indication of improving relations under Ghani.

"It's early, but the signs are good," said Saifullah Mahsud, head of the FATA Research Centre, an Islamabad-based think-tank.

"The Afghan Taliban have their financiers, their businesses, their families here. The Afghan Taliban are smart enough to know that the Pakistani state is a better contact than the TTP."

Another new development is willingness by the Taliban to open talks without preconditions, said a senior Pakistani official with direct knowledge of the process.

However, Taliban representatives have indicated that, should talks begin, they would make demands including the immediate departure of all foreign troops.

A senior aide to Ghani said anticipated Taliban demands, which may also include re-imposing the harsh interpretation of Islamic law the movement enforced during its five-year rule, would be unacceptable.

The aide said Pakistani intermediaries were "working to find middle ground", but so far reported no change in the Taliban stance.

"If these demands are not softened," the aide said, "the first day of talks could become the last day of talks."