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Newsweek

"There's Nothing Going On"

By Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau

10/22/2010

Senior Afghan Taliban chiefs flatly deny recent reports that insurgent leaders have sent secret peace feelers to Kabul. "How many times do we have to tell you there's nothing going on?" asks a senior member of the ruling council, the Quetta Shura. The reports, he tells NEWSWEEK, are disinformation aimed at weakening Taliban resolve. "This is just very obvious propaganda," he says, adding that no one of any importance has met with President Hamid Karzai's representatives.

Another senior commander (neither would be named for security reasons) blames the rumors on well-meaning tribal elders and Afghan exiles who have visited Taliban leaders in the hope of acting as mediators. "We tell them our stand is clear," he says. "The Americans and other foreign armies must first withdraw. If they leave, we guarantee we will not keep fighting." The problem, the commander says, is that these aspiring go-betweens "see this as a big breakthrough and run off to Kabul thinking this is breaking news. They don't understand that this has been our stand from the start." He also thinks some Afghans are making a good living by posing as intermediaries, asking the Americans and the government in Kabul for money to pursue a dialogue.

Although the reports have quoted no less than Gen. David Petraeus, the top U.S. military officer in Afghanistan, other officials are skeptical that the Taliban wants to meet the criteria for peace talks. "The first priority is stabilizing and securing Afghanistan," says a U.S. official who wouldn't be named discussing a sensitive issue. "The second is creating

the conditions for the Afghans to establish a workable governance system ... If the Taliban are interested in reconciliation, they need to show some good-faith effort toward accomplishing those two objectives.”

Still, the reports are putting Taliban leaders on edge. The Quetta Shura member says that when rumors recently arose that Maulvi Abdul Kabir, the head of the Taliban’s Peshawar Shura, had met with Karzai in Kabul, Kabir immediately broke security protocol and phoned senior colleagues, despite the risk of giving away his location and theirs. “He called everyone, even though it was not safe to phone, to assure us that he didn’t go,” says the Quetta Shura member.