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Afghan Foes Sit Together in Kyoto

By Habib Khan Totakhil and Nathan Hodge

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KABUL - A high-ranking member of the Taliban and a senior peace negotiator for the Afghan government sat at the same table in a conference in Japan on Wednesday, an unusual occurrence amid the conflict between the insurgency and the Afghan and U.S. governments.

It is very rare for senior Taliban officials to participate in public events abroad, let alone those also attended by Afghan government representatives. The two men didn't engage in direct talks, a Taliban spokesman said.

The conference, on reconciliation and peace-building, was independently organized by Doshisha University in Kyoto, according to Masanori Naito, dean of the university's Graduate School of Global Studies.

Qari Din Mohammad Hanafi, minister of planning in the Taliban regime ousted in 2001 and a current high-ranking member of the group's leadership, took part, said the Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid.

Mohammed Masoom Stanekzai, senior adviser to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, also attended, according to members of the High Peace Council, the government body trying to jump-start the peace process with the Taliban.

The attendance of the opposing sides at the same conference was by itself a "very decent step toward peace," said Abdul Hakim Mujahid, deputy chairman of the High Peace Council and a former Taliban envoy to the United Nations.

The Taliban have long denied reports of direct contacts with Mr. Karzai's government, saying they don't recognize what they call his "puppet regime."

The persistent secrecy about efforts to establish peace negotiations, as well as regular Taliban denials that it has been responsive to government outreach, make the appearance of the two men together in Kyoto all the more remarkable.

Direct Taliban talks with the U.S. collapsed this spring when the insurgency accused Washington of reneging on a deal to free Taliban inmates at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in exchange for a U.S. soldier held captive by the Taliban. The U.S. said it had made no such deal.

Mr. Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman, said Thursday that Mr. Hanafi went to Japan to "clarify the stance of the Islamic Emirate," the Taliban's name for their administration.

Mr. Hanafi told the conference that the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan should be a condition for peace talks, according to Mr. Naito. That has been a long-standing Taliban position.

Mr. Stanekzai, who was seriously injured in a suicide bombing last year that claimed the life of High Peace Council Chairman Burhannudin Rabbani, couldn't be reached to comment on Thursday.

A member of Hizb-e-Islami, the Islamist party founded by anti-U.S. warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, also attended the conference in Kyoto, Mr. Naito said. The representative, Ghairat Baheer, the son-in-law of Mr. Hekmatyar, was previously detained by U.S. forces.

A photograph provided by the conference organizers showed all the participants at the same table.

The event took place ahead of a high-level meeting next month in Tokyo, at which international donors are expected to deliver long-term pledges of development aid for Afghanistan.

In a statement, the Taliban Thursday denied news reports that a representative of the group had officially negotiated with Mr. Karzai's representatives in Japan. "The Islamic Emirate has often said that the conflict of Afghanistan has two sides," the statement said. "And unless the issue is solved with America talking to the Karzai administration is useless."