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Taliban open Qatar office; US to talk directly

Jun 18, 2013

KABUL (PAN): The Taliban on Tuesday opened their political office in Qatar “in a bid to start a dialogue with the world” as US officials said they hoped to meet the insurgents within days.

The announcement came hours after Afghan forces formally took over responsibility for national security from a *NATO* combat mission scheduled to leave the country next year.

A government official told Pajhwok Afghan News the Taliban office was opened in Doha around 6:30pm during a ceremony that was attended by Taliban representatives, Afghanistan foreign ministry officials and Qatari officials.

Meanwhile, the Taliban said they opened the office to start a dialogue with the world and improve their relations with the international community.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid in a statement issued to Pajhwok Afghan News said the movement wanted peace and justice not only in Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries but in the entire world.

The Taliban said the office would help to build relations with the world, allow them to meet other Afghans and to contact the United Nations, other agencies and the media.

Mujahid said the Taliban were against using the Afghanistan’s soil against any foreign country and that they would not allow anyone to use the soil against others.

He said they considered fighting for the country's independence as their duty that led them to agree for contacts with the world through the Qatar office.

He said the Taliban would welcome every political and peaceful solution that could really bring about peace and stability to Afghanistan.

"We support a political and peaceful solution that ends Afghanistan's occupation, and guarantees the Islamic system and nationwide security," it said, making no direct reference to peace talks.

The United States immediately welcomed the decision and senior officials said they hoped to meet their Afghan foes within days.

"I think the United States will have its first meeting with the Taliban for several years in a couple of days in Doha," a senior US official told reporters.

"I would expect that to be followed up within days by a meeting between the Taliban and the *High Peace Council*, which is the structure that President Karzai has set up for talks of this nature," he added, dubbing the move the "beginning of a very difficult road".

US officials said the Obama administration will open formal talks with the Taliban this week.

The negotiations with a Taliban delegation will begin Thursday in Doha to be attended by senior State Department and White House officials.

"Peace is not at hand," one US official said. "Given the level of mistrust among Afghans, it's going to be a slow process."

President Karzai will not participate in the initial talks. The Taliban has refused to speak publicly with the elected Afghan government.