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Despite Stumbles, Observers Say Momentum Remains for Afghan Peace Talks

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U.S.-led efforts to jump-start peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban hit another hurdle this week when the rebel group closed its newly opened office in Qatar, blaming President Hamid Karzai and Washington for the decision. Despite the controversy surrounding the Taliban office, observers are hopeful the peace process to end the 12-year war in Afghanistan will eventually resume.

The Taliban opened its office in the Qatari capital, Doha, about four weeks ago to facilitate separate meetings with American and Afghan peace negotiators trying to find an end to the conflict in Afghanistan.

But the dispute stemming from the inaugural ceremony provoked the rebel group to abandon the office this week and vow to renew hostilities in Afghanistan.

Observers like Kate Clark with the Afghanistan Analysts Network say the overseas Taliban office did offer an opportunity for seeking political settlement of the Afghan problem.

“Even though there was only a slim hope, it was a hope nonetheless and I think the little bit of trust that had been incrementally built up between the partners was dashed with the way that the office opened.”

After months of secret contacts between Taliban and U.S. officials, the militant group was allowed to open its long-awaited Doha office on the 18th of June.

But the Taliban named it as an office of the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” - the official name of Afghanistan during the Taliban’s five-year rule before 2001. The group also flew the official Taliban flag.

President Karzai angrily reacted, accusing the Taliban of trying to set up a parallel government-in-exile. He canceled the planned visit of his peace negotiators to Qatar, and responded to a proposed meeting between U.S. and Taliban officials by suspending negotiations with Washington on a bilateral security agreement.

The Taliban insisted its actions were in line with the understandings its representatives had reached with U.S. and Qatari authorities. But Washington dismissed those assertions and persuaded the host government to remove the Taliban flag as well as its nameplate from the office in a bid to ease Karzai’s concerns.

Analyst Clark says that the guidelines for the Taliban office in Qatar have long been unclear.

“It is still not clear who, what agreements were, and who broke which agreements. But clearly, having the Taliban flag raised caused a lot of upsets not just from President Karzai but from a lot of Afghans. But bringing it down caused a lot of upsets from the Taliban side.”

Longing for peace remains

Despite the divide, some observers say that after nearly 12 years of war, there is a strong desire to end the conflict through talks. Said Mohammad Azam, a former government official and Kabul-based political commentator, believes the breakdown in peace talks will be short-lived.

“I think in the last one decade the conflict in Afghanistan has come to a status that all parties involved in it they see negotiation as the only and most effective way of ending this conflict. I think the reason why the Taliban office was inaugurated in the first place in Doha, that was the signal that the Taliban also have come to the conclusion there is no other way but to talk (peace).”

During a trip to Kabul earlier this month, U.N. Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson cautioned that the reconciliation is going to be a “tough” and a “long” journey.

“I would hope that it is a bump in the road rather than a major road repair. I would hope that there is a realization of the importance of pursuing these talks on both sides and that they will proceed as soon as possible.”

The Taliban wants to hold “exploratory” direct talks with the United States to discuss a prisoner exchange, a deadline for all American troops to leave Afghanistan and the removal of some of its leaders’ names from a U.N. blacklist. The Taliban insists these issues are beyond the authority of the Afghan government.

Pakistan as factor

But after the Doha office controversy, President Karzai has apparently hardened his stance and now wants the Taliban to hold talks in Afghanistan so they are “free from the foreign influence.”

He has not named any country, but Karzai and other Afghan leaders have long accused neighboring Pakistan of fueling the Taliban insurgency, a charge Islamabad denies. For their part, officials in Pakistan allege that President Karzai is obstructing peace efforts in Afghanistan for fear of losing authority.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry says Pakistan hopes progress will be made in overcoming the challenges facing the Doha process.

“And that is why Pakistan has been emphasizing the need for patience and perseverance in pursuing the reconciliation process. We have always been saying that all stakeholders in the Afghan peace process will have to engage constructively in the reconciliation process.”

Pakistani authorities have suggested they played a role in facilitating the opening of the Taliban office in Doha but have not elaborated. The admission has strengthened suspicions Islamabad maintains close contacts with the Afghan insurgency allegedly to influence events in Afghanistan after foreign combat troops leave.