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McClatchy Newspapers

Afghan government in tentative talks with insurgent leader

By Saeed Shah

02/11/2010

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, one of Afghanistan's most brutal Islamist warlords, is holding tentative peace talks with the government of Afghanistan that could cause a split in the Taliban-led insurgency, Afghan politicians in Kabul said Wednesday.

The terms that Hekmatyar has outlined are softer than those proposed by the Taliban, who've demanded that U.S. and other foreign troops must leave Afghanistan before peace talks can begin. Hekmatyar would allow international forces to remain in the country for 18 months.

The government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, with the tacit backing of the international community, is feeling its way toward some dialogue with insurgent groups in an attempt to end the violence in Afghanistan.

Hekmatyar, 59, a veteran jihadist who fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s with U.S. and Pakistani support, now heads the smallest of the three main insurgent groups. The other two, the Taliban and the Haqqani network, are associated with al Qaida.

A deal with Hekmatyar would be controversial, especially with women's groups and human rights activists, who fear that it would jeopardize the hard-won freedoms enshrined in Afghanistan's 2004 constitution.

Hekmatyar's proposal, quietly circulated to the government and selected politicians late last year, would install a "neutral" interim government in Kabul for two years, said Afghan political leaders who've seen the plan but didn't want to be named for fear of their own safety.

During the last four months of the interim government's tenure, a loya jirga, a traditional "grand assembly" of tribal elders and other influential groups, would be convened to draft a new constitution, and then elections would be held. Hekmatyar's group in turn would lay down its arms.

Hekmatyar's deputy, Qutbuddin Hilal, was in Kabul last month, where he was thought to have held talks at the presidential palace, the Afghan politicians said. Hilal is based in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar, where many leaders of the militant wing of Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami live.

Hekmatyar's son, Feroz, told McClatchy by phone from an undisclosed location that the group wants a settlement, but said that "Hezb-i-Islami has not held any serious talks with anyone."

"Hezb-i-Islami is not against peace in Afghanistan. We are not against Karzai and peace talks We are not seeking any position," Feroz Hekmatyar said. "We want foreigners to leave, to go out of Afghanistan."

Feroz Hekmatyar said he took part in a conference last month in the Maldives, a secret event that brought together Hezb-e-Islami with Taliban figures and several members of parliament and that participants later described in detail to McClatchy.

"Hezb-e-Islami doesn't have any relationship with al Qaida," he added. "Hezb-i-Islami has some political disagreements with the Taliban."

A wing of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's party is already participating in Afghan politics, with more than two-dozen members of parliament and two ministerial positions in Karzai's cabinet, though the parliamentary party claims it's independent of Hekmatyar.

"He (Hekmatyar) is ready for reconciliation," said Khalid Farooqi, a senior member of parliament for Hezb-i-Islami. "There are talks between him and the government, but I don't know the result."

Hekmatyar is on a United Nations blacklist of terrorists, and that would make negotiations with him difficult. According to the U.S. State Department, he had links with Osama bin Laden and gave the al Qaida leader shelter in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s.

"The government must talk to Hekmatyar and the Taliban at the same time," said Bakhtar Aminzay, a senator and the president of the Afghanistan National Peace Jirga, a non-government group that promotes political reconciliation. "If you make a deal with Hekmatyar and not the Taliban, the problem could get worse."

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was one of the main "mujahedeen" commanders in the U.S.-backed resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

With the support of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency, he then threw his group into the Afghan civil war that followed in the early 1990s, briefly becoming prime minister.

Hekmatyar ordered the shelling of Kabul during that period, killing thousands of civilians. He was ousted when the Taliban came to power and fled to exile in Iran in 1997, and later to Pakistan.

More recently, his group re-emerged as an armed faction inside Afghanistan, with a significant presence in the northeast. They claimed responsibility for a 2008 assassination attempt against Karzai.

Many think that he never had much support in Afghanistan and was propped up for decades by Pakistan's ISI. Some say he'd have to live in exile under any settlement.

"Even Hekmatyar's party (inside parliament) will not welcome his return to politics. He is in real trouble. He is losing his influence over Hezb-i-Islami," said Haroun Mir, deputy director of Afghanistan's Center for Research and Policy Studies, an independent research organization in Kabul. "He's desperate, worried that he'll be left out of any negotiations."

Hekmatyar's Pakistani benefactors, who are keen to play a major role in deciding the fate of Afghanistan, may be pushing him into talks.

"He (Hekmatyar) has a weak hand to play and it may be made even weaker if the Pakistanis are putting pressure on him and his people at his base in Shamshatoo (Afghan refugee camp), near Peshawar," said a U.S. official in Washington, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue. "Perhaps they're offering him up as evidence of their ability to deliver on the insurgents."