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Reuters

U.S. entering direct talks with Taliban: report

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The United States has entered into direct talks with leaders of the Taliban in Afghanistan, but contacts are exploratory and not yet a peace negotiation, according to an article on Saturday in The New Yorker magazine.

The article, citing people briefed on the talks, said the talks are to assess who in the Taliban leadership, if anyone, might engage in formal peace negotiations and under what conditions.

"They're exploratory, at least as I understand them," Steve Coll, the article's author, said in an interview on National Public Radio.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has held sporadic talks with current and former Taliban members, but with little apparent result.

There was a flurry of unsourced or guardedly sourced newspaper reports last year of secret talks, sponsored by NATO, between Afghan officials and Taliban leaders. In one case a so-called Taliban leader turned out to be an imposter.

The United States rejected direct talks with the Taliban after September 11, 2001, saying it was partly to blame for the attacks in New York and Washington, along with al Qaeda.

But Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan who died in December, pushed last year for a renewed effort to talk to the Taliban.

The New Yorker piece said the recent U.S.-led talks were meant to lead to more "successful and durable negotiations" led by Karzai, in which the United States would take a supporting role.

The goal would be to persuade at least some Taliban leaders to break with al Qaeda and participate in Afghan electoral politics, the article said. But it said the risk would be sparking an ethnic civil war between Pashtuns, from whom the Taliban draw support, and non-Pashtuns.

Talks also likely would be slow and complicated, "atomized and menaced by interference from neighboring governments -- not just Pakistan's but those of Iran, India, Russia, Uzbekistan and China," the article said.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in a speech on Friday the United States was mounting a "diplomatic surge" to end the war in Afghanistan. She said Washington still intends to begin withdrawing some of the nearly 100,000 U.S. soldiers in the war zone in July with the aim of completing the transition to Afghan responsibility by the end of 2014.

"We are launching a diplomatic surge to move this conflict toward a political outcome that shatters the alliance between the Taliban and al Qaeda, ends the insurgency and helps produce a stable Afghanistan and a peaceful region," Clinton said.