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Analysis: forcing Taleban into negotiations

By Michael Evans

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Talking to the Taleban as a way of bringing an end to the war in Afghanistan is now moving up the agenda after the recent offensives in Helmand province involving 3,000 British troops and 6,000 US Marines.

This is not a new issue. Attempts have already been made to persuade elements of the Taleban to give up violence and enter into political dialogue with the government of President Karzai.

The most high-profile moves towards reconciliation took place under the auspices of the Saudi Arabian authorities. Talks have been held in Saudi Arabia, but the principal players on the Taleban side were former members of the deposed government in Kabul, not its current commanders.

The speech by David Miliband, the Foreign Secretary, at Nato in Brussels is timed to coincide with the completion of the British-led Operation Panther's Claw. The offensive had, over a period of more than a month, established security zones in the areas of central Helmand where the Taleban had previously enjoyed influence and, to a degree, control over the local communities.

As the campaign against the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland proved, reconciliation and political dialogue can only work effectively if the "enemy" has come to realise that its aims cannot be achieved by force of arms.

The Taleban are in no sense defeated and no one is expecting the hard-core insurgency leaders, based in Pakistan, to start talking peace. But with sufficient Nato troops stationed in areas once dominated by the Taleban, there may be an increasing number of the lower-echelon fighters prepared to start negotiations.