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The Associated Press

Taliban in Afghanistan may be more open to talks

By Jack Healy

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The Taliban have begun to send signals that they are interested in a negotiated settlement, potentially offering an opening for the West and the Afghan government, several Western officials said.

Though there have been some meetings among the Afghan government, NATO officials and some Taliban figures — and even with someone who turned out to be a Taliban imposter — the Taliban have always insisted that NATO troops would have to leave Afghanistan before any meaningful negotiations could take place. Now two recent statements suggest instead that they would be willing to engage in talks even with foreigners in the country. The Taliban are also speaking in less inflammatory terms.

The Taliban shift comes even as Afghan public opinion has grown increasingly skeptical about the viability of peace talks in recent weeks, Western officials said. Under the best of circumstances, it will probably take years for a deal to be reached, but many Afghans and Westerners believe that the parties need to start talks before the United States begins to draw down substantial numbers of troops.

"The Taliban's public position has undergone an evolution," said Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations special representative to Afghanistan, citing a United Nations analysis of Taliban statements since January, including one on July 28 posted on the Taliban's Alemarah website. "They are becoming politically engaged." The analysis was shared Wednesday with senior diplomats in Kabul.

A Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, confirmed that the article had been posted, and while he said it did not represent the official position, he reiterated several of the article's points. Arsala Rahmani, a former Taliban higher education minister who is now a member of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, said he believed that the posting by the Taliban was part of an effort to show an interest in talks.

"I am pretty certain that the Taliban are showing a little bit of flexibility recently, and as far as I have information there is a keenness and willingness from Taliban and among the Taliban ranks for peace," he said.

He added, "But we have to prepare the ground first."

The Taliban statement, which describes how to bring an end to the war and how the Taliban will behave, includes this sentence: "The Americans and all foreign invading forces should seek a face-saving exit from Afghanistan in understanding with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan."

The United Nations analysis notes that "this envisages talks specifically about foreign troop withdrawal."

Another statement promises that the Taliban "will abide by its commitments to the stability of the region following the withdrawal of foreign forces."