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Taliban hold secret talks with Afghan president

By KATHY GANNON

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KABUL, Afghanistan – Three Taliban figures met secretly with Afghanistan's president two weeks ago in an effort by the Afghan government to weaken the U.S.-led coalition's most vicious enemy, a powerful al-Qaida linked network that straddles the border region with Pakistan.

A former Afghan official said the meeting in Kabul included an ex-Taliban governor, Maulvi Abdul Kabir. He comes from the same Zadran tribe as the leaders of the Haqqani network, an autonomous wing of the Taliban responsible for many attacks against U.S. and Afghan forces, the former official said over the weekend.

U.S. and Afghan officials hope that if Kabir agrees to quit the insurgency, it could split the Zadran tribe and undercut the pool of recruits from which the Haqqanis currently draw fighters. But it was unclear whether any progress toward that end was made during the talks.

Weakening the Haqqanis' grip over the Zadran tribe could help shift the power balance in eastern provinces where the network poses a major threat. The Haqqani network, led by ailing Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin, is believed to be sheltering top al-Qaida leaders across the border in Pakistan.

Kabir served as governor of Nangarhar province and deputy prime minister during the Taliban rule, which ended with the U.S.-led invasion of 2001. He is believed to run the

Taliban council in the Pakistani city of Peshawar but is not considered a powerhouse in the Taliban.

The two other Taliban who took part in the talks were Mullah Sadre Azam and Anwar-ul-Haq Mujahed.

Mujahed is credited with helping Osama bin Laden escape the U.S. assault on Tora Bora in 2001, the former official said. He has been in Pakistani custody since June last year when he was picked up in a raid in Peshawar, where one of several Afghan Taliban shuras, or councils, is located.

The men were brought by helicopter from Peshawar and spent two nights in a luxury Kabul hotel before returning to Pakistan.

The U.S. earlier this month acknowledged facilitating some Taliban trips to Kabul but provided no specifics. The Pakistani military has not commented on such reports

The former Afghan official, who asked not to be named because of his relationship with both the government and the Taliban, described Kabir and his associates as "midlevel" contacts because they have little, if any influence over more powerful Taliban factions.

A Western official confirmed a meeting had taken place but said he did not know who attended and whether progress was made. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not supposed to talk to media about the issue.

Karzai has formed a 70-member council to try to reconcile with the Taliban and find a political solution to the insurgency. The Taliban's top leadership has denied that any of their representatives have been involved in talks. They claim their leaders will not discuss peace with the government unless foreign troops first leave Afghanistan.

President Barack Obama's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, last week said news reports of extensive discussions between Afghan government officials and senior Taliban commanders were off base. He told reporters in Washington last week that there have been no such talks or discussions, let alone negotiations.

However, Holbrooke did say that individuals who have fought alongside the Taliban — apparently not Taliban leaders themselves — have been reaching out. Holbrooke mentioned no names but said those who are making such contacts are "provincial leaders, individual commanders."

In a related development, Arsala Rahmani, an ex-Taliban who is now on Karzai's newly established peace commission, told the AP that the Afghan government has asked Pakistan to repatriate 31 suspected Taliban in its custody. The most senior Taliban in Pakistan custody, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban's No. 2, was picked up in a

joint raid with the CIA earlier this year. Pakistani authorities have quashed repeated rumors of his release saying he is still in custody.