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## US has no plan to divide Afghanistan: Crocker

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KABUL - The US ambassador in Kabul, supporting the government-led peace process, said on Tuesday his country had no secret plan either to divide Afghanistan or change the present system of government.

"I would like to address recent statements and speculation that have been reported in the press. Any suggestion that the US has a "secret plan" to divide Afghanistan or support some other form of government is absurd and simply false," he remarked.

Addressing a ceremony at the Government Media and Information Centre (GMIC) in Kabul, Ryan C. Crocker said American soldiers were laying down their lives for the future of a unified Afghanistan, and any implication that Washington and Kabul were at odds.

The US cutting a separate deal with the Taliban dishonored the memory of those men and women in uniform, he noted. "US taxpayers have given billions of dollars over the past decade, consistently supporting the government and people of Afghanistan in rebuilding this country..."

"A free and independent media plays a vital role in any democracy by keeping the public well and accurately informed of key issues," the ambassador believed.

On the recent visit of US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Marc Grossman, Crocker said he engaged in a comprehensive discussion on the way forward with President Hamid Karzai and High Peace Council leaders.

"President Karzai, in his speech to Parliament, spoke in support of an office in Qatar for the Afghan Taliban. For a peace process to succeed, Afghans must talk to Afghans," the ambassador stressed.

As Secretary of State Clinton said after a meeting with the Qatari foreign minister earlier in the month, nothing had been concluded on the opening of the Taliban's bureau and more work needed to be done, Crocker added.

"I would describe the work that still needs to be done, as first, Qatar and Afghanistan need to be in direct contact on the subject ... secondly, for an office to open, we also need to have a clear statement from the Taliban against international terrorism and in support of the peace process..."

The diplomat continued: "Grossman is having meetings in Qatar and will brief President Karzai in Rome in the coming days. In this and all our dealings with Afghanistan, we work in support of the central government and its efforts to build a strong, stable and secure state.