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## New concerns added to Afghan peace process

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Kabul - Protests in Afghanistan over the alleged Quran burning by U.S. troops in Bagram airbase entered its third day on Thursday, leaving 15 people dead and 59 others wounded across the country and prompting U.S. President Barack Obama to apologize.

In the meantime, in an effort to promote Afghan peace process, Afghan president Hamid Karzai on Wednesday officially invited Taliban leaders to talk directly with Afghan government in the Afghan-led peace process.

While Afghan government is officially opening the gate for direct dialogue with Taliban outfits, Afghan analysts believe, the alleged Quran burning may add new concerns to the already intricate Afghan peace process.

### U.S. WANTS EARLY WITHDRAW

Recently, several NATO members have indicated that they would withdraw troops ahead of previous schedule from Afghanistan, with an unprecedented eagerness to end the decade-long war.

In early February, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said that U.S. troops in Afghanistan will start to finish combat missions in mid-2013, almost one year earlier than previous plans.

Previously, French President Nicolas Sarkozy also announced his decision to end the combat

mission of French troops in Afghanistan by the end of next year, a move clearly in response to an incident happened in Kapisa province, Afghanistan on Jan. 20, in which four French soldiers were killed by an Afghan man wearing Afghan National Army uniform.

The early withdraw of U.S. and French troops from Afghanistan indicates the worsening of security situation in the war-torn country, for on one hand, other NATO member states will very likely follow the footsteps of U.S. and France to withdraw early from battlefield, while on the other hand, as was denoted in a NATO file, if NATO pulls out early, Taliban might once again "conquer" Afghanistan.

In response to this, NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen reiterated on the meetings of NATO Defense Ministers in Brussels from Feb. 2 to Feb. 3, that the deadline for security transfer from NATO-led International Security Assistant Force to Afghan government is, as always, the end of 2014.

In Afghanistan, the newly-announced decisions of early withdraw triggered new concerns. Many local analysts believed that the early withdraw of NATO-led ISAF forces will add to the momentum of Taliban insurgency, worsening the security situation in the Middle Asian country. They also believe if U.S. wants to finish the security transfer successfully, it's imperative to bring Taliban leaders to the table.

#### AFGHAN GOVERNMENT-TALIBAN DIRECT TALKS

The Afghan government also realized the urgency for the peace process, as in mid-February, Afghan president Hamid Karzai during his first visit to Pakistan since the assassination of Afghan peace envoy and former president Burhanuddin Rabbani in last September, expressed his hope for Pakistan government to facilitate direct talks with the elusive Taliban chief, Mullah Mohammad Omar.

On Feb. 22, Karzai in his statement officially invited Taliban leaders for direct talks, a move Taliban has yet to make comments. However, Taliban militants had in the past rejected any Afghan government's offer for talks, conditioning any dialogue with the pullout of NATO-led foreign forces from the country.

However, Afghan analysts who believe the invitation has opened the door for the peace talks are also skeptical about the government's initiative to bring the Taliban outfit to dialogue table.

"Inviting Taliban for direct talks is an initiative to encourage the outfit to act independently in peace interaction without Pakistan influence," said Ahmad Zia Rafat, a Kabul University professor.

"There are many hard-line factions in Taliban outfit that are still opposed to any form of peace talks with Afghan government and U.S.," Haroon Mir, director of Afghanistan Center for Research and Policy Studies, said to Xinhua, "They will stop the peace talk at all costs."

#### QURAN BURNING ADDS NEW CONCERNS

While Afghan government officially opens the gate for direct talks with Taliban, the alleged Quran burning by U.S. troops in Bagram airbase triggered a massive protest by Afghan people, adding new concern to the impending peace talks.

On Feb. 21, many Afghan people discovered a large number of Islamic religious materials, including Quran, being burnt outside Bagram Air Base, an incident followed by massive protests in several big cities in Afghanistan, where thousands of protesters threw stones, burnt tires, chanted anti-U.S. slogans, and blocked the road between Kabul, the Afghan capital, and Jalalabad.

Several Afghan parliament members even called upon ordinary people to pick up arms and fight U.S. soldiers to the end, while Taliban outfit on Feb. 23 also ask Afghan people "not to stop" the retaliation to the Quran burning.

The ever-escalating protest prompted U.S. president Barak Obama, NATO commander in Afghanistan John Allen, U.S. Defense secretary Leon Panetta and State Secretary Hillary Clinton to respectively offer their apologies. Afghan president Hamid Karzai also asked his fellow countrymen to keep calm and renounce violence.

However, analysts believe that Afghan people's anger is difficult to stop in a short notice. After ten-year occupation, many Afghan people have developed dissent toward U.S. troops for killing innocent civilians and disrespecting local religious traditions. The Quran burning is the third scandal in a row that happened in NATO-led ISAF, triggering once again the anti-U.S. sentiment among Afghan people.

Afghan observers believe that, while U.S. is seeking peace talks with Taliban outfit, the growing resentment for U.S. among Afghan people may add to the challenges facing the implementation of U.S. strategies in Afghanistan.