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The Associated Press

Moderate Taliban speaks of divisions

By Kathy Gannon

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KABUL - One of the most powerful men on the Taliban council, Agha Jan Motasim, nearly lost his life in a hail of bullets for advocating a negotiated settlement that would bring a broad-based government to his beleaguered homeland of Afghanistan.

In an exclusive and rare interview by a member of the so-called Quetta Shura, Motasim told The Associated Press Sunday that a majority of Taliban wants a peace settlement and that there are only "a few" hard-liners in the movement.

"There are two kinds of Taliban. The one type of Taliban who believes that the foreigners want to solve the problem but there is another group and they don't believe, and they are thinking that the foreigners only want to fight," he said by telephone. "I can tell you, though, that the majority of the Taliban and the Taliban leadership want a broad-based government for all Afghan people and an Islamic system like other Islamic countries."

But Motasim chastised the West, singling out the United States and Britain, for failing to bolster the moderates within the fundamentalist Islamic movement by refusing to recognize the Taliban as a political identity and backtracking on promises — all of which he said strengthens the hard-liners and weakens moderates like himself.

He lamented Sunday's assassination in Kabul of Arsala Rahmani, a member of the Afghan government-appointed peace council who was active in trying to set up formal talks with

insurgents. Rahmani served as deputy minister of higher education in the former Taliban regime but later reconciled with the current Afghan government.

"He was a nationalist. We respected him," Motasim said.

Motasim used his own stature to press for talks nearly three years before the United States began making overtures to the Taliban in late 2010. At the time, he was also chief of the Taliban political committee, a powerful position that he held until he was shot last August. He is still a member of the Taliban leadership council, the Quetta Shura, named after the Pakistani city of the same name.

His voice softened and he paused often as he reflected on the brutal shooting in the port city of Karachi, Pakistan, where he lived, while moving regularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan in areas that he refused to identify.

Several bullets shattered his body and he was hospitalized for many weeks. In the first days after the shooting, he wasn't expected to survive.

The AP spoke to Motasim from Turkey where he had gone for additional treatment. When speaking of his attackers, he referred to them as brothers and colleagues, saying they may have been Taliban hard-liners who opposed his moderate positions.

"My idea was I wanted a broad-based government, all political parties together and maybe some hard-liners among the Taliban in Afghanistan and in Pakistan didn't like to hear this and so they attacked me," he said. Some of the gunmen may have come from Afghanistan and some may have been from Pakistan's North Waziristan where militant groups have found sanctuary, Motasim said.

In the early minutes of the telephone conversation, Motasim was reluctant to talk politics, saying he had been told by his friends and colleagues to stay silent.

"I am not involved in any talks. I am only here for my treatment," he said.

But he gradually opened up, saying the Taliban have three main demands: They want all Afghan prisoners released from U.S.-run detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay and near Bagram Air Field north of the Afghan capital; the names of all Taliban currently on the United Nations sanctions blacklist removed; and recognition of the Taliban as a political party.

He said talks in Qatar ended earlier this year after the United States reneged on a promise to release five prisoners from Guantanamo Bay. "But those are just the famous ones," he said. "There are thousands more being held in Bagram and they are being held under the name of Taliban but they are innocent people, farmers and clerics."

The prisoner exchange issue is rife with sensitivity as the United States has sought to exchange American Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, captured by the Taliban in 2009, for Afghan Taliban held in Guantanamo. It appears the prisoner exchange fell through after the Afghan authorities

demanded the five prisoners be repatriated to Afghanistan, according to an Afghan official who asked not to be named because he was not authorized to brief the media. The five prisoners have demanded they be allowed to go to Qatar with their families.

Motasim said he wasn't told why the prisoners were not released but when they weren't the hard-liners among the Taliban took it as a sign that the United States was disingenuous, said Motasim, who acknowledged that the Taliban have set up an office in Qatar.

He said the office has no official recognition as a political headquarters of the Taliban, rather it has been veiled in secrecy and the American interlocutors are engaging with them as insurgents not political representatives of at least some Afghans. Motasim said most of the Taliban who were negotiating with the Americans are on the U.N. sanctions list.

The U.N. Security Council imposed sanctions against the Taliban in November 1999 for refusing to send Osama bin Laden to the United States or a third country for trial on terrorism charges in connection with the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. The sanctions — a travel ban, arms embargo and assets freeze — were later extended to al-Qaida. In July 2005, the council extended the sanctions again to cover affiliates and splinter groups of al-Qaida and the Taliban.

"They (the U.S.) have to give political independence to the Taliban," he said.

Looking ahead to next week's NATO summit in Chicago, Motasim said he had a message for participants.

"The decisions of NATO should be for the good of Afghanistan and should not call for more violence. It should call for an end to the fighting, an end to the raids and killings," he said. "Afghanistan is destroyed, the people are displaced, refugees, poor people are dying in their homes and also foreigners are dying here. It should end."