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Karzai says US and Taliban holding Doha talks

Taliban spokesman and US official deny claim as Afghan president meets with US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel in Kabul.

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The Taliban and a US official have denied claims by Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, that they have resumed talks in Qatar.

The Taliban formally suspended the talks one year ago, blaming "shaky, erratic and vague" US statements.

"Senior leaders of the Taliban and the Americans are engaged in talks in the Gulf state on a daily basis," Karzai told a gathering to mark International Women's Day.

His comments came ahead of talks on Sunday with Chuck Hagel, the US defence secretary, who is in Kabul for his first visit to Afghanistan since becoming the Pentagon chief.

The US government has said it remained committed to political reconciliation involving talks with the Taliban but progress would require agreement between the Afghan government and the fighters.

"This is simply incorrect," said a US official, who declined to be identified, when asked about Karzai's remarks.

"We continue to support an Afghan-led process of political reconciliation."

Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman in Afghanistan, also denied that negotiations with the US had resumed and said no progress had been made since they were suspended.

"The Taliban strongly rejects Karzai's comments," he said.

Hagel talks

Karzai is currently negotiating a pact with Washington for the long-term presence of US forces in Afghanistan, and his remarks come just days after an agreement to transfer the US prison outside of Kabul to Afghan authority fell through.

The issue of US troop levels after next year's withdrawal, when Washington will halve its 66,000 troop level, will be one of the main subjects on the agenda at the talks between Hagel and Karzai.

Hagel's visit also coincides with the passing of a deadline imposed by Karzai for US special forces to leave the province of Wardak, after Karzai accused them of overseeing torture and killings in the area.

US forces have denied involvement in any abuses and it was not clear if they were leaving Wardak by the deadline.

The Kabul government has been pushing hard to get the Taliban to the negotiating table before most US-led NATO combat troops withdraw by the end of 2014.

Afghan officials have not held direct talks with the fighters, who were toppled in 2001 and have proven resilient after more than a decade of war with Western and Afghan forces.

US diplomats have been seeking to broaden exploratory talks with the Taliban that began clandestinely in Germany in late 2010 after the Taliban offered to open a representative office in Qatar.

Regional power Pakistan indicated a few months ago that it would support the peace process by releasing Afghan Taliban detainees who may help promote the peace process.

But there have been no tangible signs the move advanced reconciliation.

Taliban accused

A day after two suicide bombings killed 19 people, Karzai also accused the Taliban of trying to show Afghans that violence will worsen if most foreign troops leave as planned by the end of next year.

Karzai said the two attacks, one outside the Afghan Defence Ministry and the other near a police checkpoint in eastern Khost province, show the Taliban is conducting attacks to help show that international forces will still be needed to keep the peace after 2014.

"The explosions in Kabul and Khost yesterday showed that they are at the service of America and at the service of this phrase: 2014," said Karzai.

"They are trying to frighten us into thinking that if the foreigners are not in Afghanistan, we would be facing these sorts of incidents."

Karzai is known for making incendiary comments in his public speeches, a move that is often attributed to him trying to appeal to those who sympathise with the Taliban or as a way to gain leverage when he feels his international allies are ignoring his country's sovereignty.

In previous speeches he has threatened to join the Taliban and called his NATO allies occupiers who want to plunder Afghanistan's resources.