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Afghanistan, Pakistan at loggerheads over peace efforts

7/4/2013

** Afghan army chief says Pakistan could end Afghan war 'in weeks' if it were serious about peace*

ISLAMABAD: Kabul and Islamabad traded insults over the war with the Taliban on Wednesday, plunging their frosty relations to a new low at a key juncture in efforts to search for peace before NATO withdraws.

It was the most explosive in a series of rows that have marred Western efforts to build trust between the two governments, considered integral to forging any lasting peace with the Taliban who have been fighting foreign armies in Afghanistan for nearly 12 years. It came as a US drone strike targeting the al Qaeda-linked Haqqani network, blamed by Washington for some of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan, killed 17 militants in Pakistan, officials said.

Afghan army chief of staff General Sher Mohammad Karimi told the BBC in an interview that Pakistan could end the Afghan war “in weeks” if it were serious about peace. “Madrasas have been closed and all the Taliban have been unleashed to Afghanistan,” he said. He also said “the Taliban are under their control” and Pakistan could do far more to promote a nascent peace process. The search for peace in Afghanistan is now an urgent priority as 100,000 US-led NATO combat troops prepare to withdraw next year and Afghan forces take on the fight against insurgents.

Pakistan was a key backer of the 1996-2001 Taliban regime in Kabul and is believed to shelter some of the movement's top leaders. The West believes Pakistani support is vital to securing any workable peace deal in Afghanistan and officials have recently praised Islamabad for helping to support peace efforts. After talks with Britain's leader David Cameron on Sunday, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif spoke of his government's "firm resolve to promote the shared objective of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan".

But Afghan President Hamid Karzai has long decried what he sees as Pakistani double-dealing designed to bring about a friendly regime in Kabul, and Karimi said this bad faith extended to Nawaz's objections to US drone strikes in Pakistan's northwest. He argued that Islamabad had "given the lists" of militants it wants taken out and claimed US drone strikes are "never used against Haqqani or Afghan Taliban".

But Pakistani officials told AFP that Afghan and Pakistani militants were among the dead when a US drone strike targeted a Haqqani compound in the tribal belt early Wednesday. They said unmanned aircraft fired four missiles into the compound in the main market area of the main town of North Waziristan district. It was the deadliest US drone strike reported in Pakistan since 18 insurgents were killed on the border between North Waziristan and the tribal district of Orakzai on October 11, 2012.

Pakistan condemned the drone strike as a violation of sovereignty, as it does routinely despite leaked US diplomatic cables that showed leaders allegedly agreed to them in private. Islamabad "categorically rejected" Karimi's remarks, which laid bare the mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad despite a February summit hosted by Britain in an effort to ignite peace efforts. "Pakistan has exercised extreme restraint in the face of highly provocative language used by the Afghan civil and military officials over the last few months, not to mention some totally fabricated accusations," the Foreign Ministry said.

Pakistan said it would not be deterred in its efforts to support international efforts to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan and accused elements in the Afghan government of insincerity. It called on Afghan officials to "refrain from levelling baseless allegations and work towards creating a conducive environment that helps advance the shared objectives of peace, stability and prosperity". Pakistani tribal affairs and Taliban expert, Rahimullah Yusufzai, told AFP that Afghans were lashing out at Pakistan to disguise their own weakness as the country lurches towards uncertain presidential elections next April. "There is a problem inside Afghanistan. A large number of Afghans don't accept their present government and they oppose the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan,"