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## We have contacts with Taliban but don't control them: Aziz

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- \* Sartaj Aziz says Islamabad can only help bring about peace deal, not impose one
- \* Rassoul says bilateral efforts to strengthen ties, fight terrorism 'have not been successful'

KABUL: Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs and National Security Sartaj Aziz on Sunday visited Kabul to hold talks with Afghan leadership and assured that Pakistan would extend its full support and cooperation in holding intra-Afghan talks for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

During his day-long visit, Aziz held talks with Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmai Rassoul. The two sides discussed ways to further promote bilateral relations and prospects for peace in Afghanistan.

Addressing a press conference, Aziz said Pakistan was ready to help in holding intra- Afghan talks for peace and stability in Afghanistan if the Afghan leaders asked for it.

He said Pakistan has been trying to help jump start the peace process as a stable Afghanistan is in Pakistan's own interest. However, he said any peace talks must be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led. He said Pakistan would take every step to bring peace in Afghanistan.

Aziz, who was on his first visit to Kabul after assuming charge of adviser on foreign affairs and national security, said, "The PML-N government wants to expand relations with Afghanistan."

He said his visit brought a message of peace and cooperation from Pakistan. He said Pakistan wanted to remove all barriers in the way of trade between the two countries. He said expansion in trade would bring prosperity for people of the two countries besides improving the economy.

Aziz also invited President Hamid Karzai to Islamabad to strengthen bilateral relations and help improve strained relations and peace efforts with the Taliban.

He said, “The main purpose of my visit is to convey a formal invitation from Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to President Karzai to visit Pakistan.”

Aziz said Pakistan was again prepared to ease the movement of Taliban negotiators and release more Taliban detainees should the Afghan government request it.

The West considers Pakistan’s support vital to achieving lasting peace with the Taliban in Afghanistan. International efforts to start talks with Taliban insurgents on ending 12 years of war are in disarray after the disastrous opening of a Taliban liaison office in Qatar last month.

The office was initially hailed as a first step towards a peace deal, but a furious Karzai slammed it as an unofficial embassy for a Taliban government-in-exile.

Last week Karzai’s chief of staff, Karim Khorram, claimed the Taliban office was part of a plot to break up Afghanistan, orchestrated by either Pakistan or the United States. Aziz denied perceptions held by many in Afghanistan that Pakistan controls the Taliban, given that its leaders have presumed sanctuary in Pakistan, and insisted Islamabad could only help bring about a deal and not impose one.

“We have some contacts with the Taliban because of the past but we don’t control them,” he told the news conference.

He said Pakistan had eased the movement of Taliban negotiators and released 26 Taliban detainees at the request of the Afghan government.

“In the future, if to this extent we are requested, we can play the same role but in appropriate time and in consultation with other interested parties,” he said.

In an unusually blunt remark, Zalmay Rassoul said that efforts on both sides to strengthen relations, fight terrorism and ignite peace talks “have not been successful”.

“I hope the new government of Pakistan will open a new chapter in Pakistan-Afghan relations,” he told the same press conference. agencies