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Second round of Afghan peace talks likely next week in China

BY HAMID SHALIZI

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China is likely to host a second round of peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives next week, an Afghan official said on Friday, raising hopes for progress toward a political settlement to end years of bloodshed.

China is increasingly worried about insurgency in the region spilling over into its territory and has been playing a role to broker a peace deal between Kabul and the Taliban insurgents.

"The second round of talks is most probably going to be held in Urumqi in China on July 30," said Ismail Qasimyar, a senior member of Afghan High Peace Council.

Urumqi is the capital of China's far-west Xinjiang region. Beijing says it faces its own radical Islamist insurrection there, members of which it believes get shelter and training from Taliban and other militants along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Qasimyar said delegations from China and the United States would observe the talks, as they did in the groundbreaking first official meeting this month.

Pakistan hosted the inaugural talks between Afghan government and the Taliban in its capital in a tentative step to end more than 13 years of fighting in Afghanistan that kills hundreds every month.

Neighboring Pakistan is key to the process because of its historic ties to the Afghan Taliban leaders, who have used the Pakistan border region as a safe haven.

While the budding peace process represents a step forward, its success is uncertain. The Taliban leadership is divided on whether to talk or continue fighting, and it is unclear whether those who are negotiating would be able to enforce any cease-fire.

The Afghan delegation to the talks in Pakistan said the Taliban side had raised the issues of foreign troops operating in Afghanistan, U.N sanctions against its leaders and prisoners of war and those issues would be discussed further in the second round.

U.S. forces and their Afghan allies ousted the Taliban in 2001. The Islamists have been fighting since then to expel foreign troops and overthrow the U.S.-backed government.

U.S.-led forces formally ended their combat mission in Afghanistan at the end of last year, leaving a small contingent of about 12,000 NATO troops to train Afghan forces.

However, violence has sharply increased in most parts of the country this year with Afghan forces suffering record number of casualties.