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Reuters

Pakistan says reaches out to Afghan Taliban

By Sue Pleming and Michael Georgy Sue Pleming And Michael Georgy

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U.S. ally Pakistan is reaching out to "all levels" of the Afghan Taliban in a bid to encourage reconciliation in its war-torn neighbor, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said on Saturday.

President Barack Obama has said a political solution was needed to stabilize Afghanistan and has emphasized that success would not be possible without the support of Pakistan.

"We are trying to reach out to them at all levels and all of us would like that our efforts should bring some results but at this point in time it is very difficult to say," ministry spokesman Abdul Basit said of Pakistan's efforts.

The Afghan government is preparing a reintegration plan with the Taliban that targets lower to mid-level Taliban fighters but has not focused on more senior leaders of the insurgency.

International donors are meeting in London on January 28, when Afghan President Hamid Karzai is expected to seek their support for his reintegration plan.

Analysts say Pakistan is well placed to mediate in Afghanistan, where it nurtured the Taliban in the 1990s.

Basit said it was important that there be reconciliation at all levels and that Pakistan was helping in this regard. He declined to give any details.

"Whether or not our efforts will yield results, we will see," he told Reuters in an interview.

"We don't want to discuss the specifics. There are efforts being made and we are trying to win over those Taliban or forces who are 'reconcilables'. Let's see," he added.

Asked specifically whether Pakistan was targeting top-level leaders, he said: "We are trying at all levels but where we succeed is another matter."

Defense Secretary Robert Gates visited Pakistan this week and urged it to root out Afghan Taliban based in its northwestern border enclaves, from where they have been orchestrating an intensified insurgency in Afghanistan.

UNDER PRESSURE

Pakistan has repeatedly told Washington that it was already fighting a homegrown Taliban and does not have the resources to open up new fronts against Afghan militant groups based in its northwest. Such groups include the Haqqani network, which the U.S. military says is the biggest threat in Afghanistan.

The United States has intensified unmanned drone attacks on militants in northwest Pakistan after a deadly attack on U.S. intelligence agents across the border in Afghanistan's Khost province on December 30.

Pakistan complains the attacks are an affront to its sovereignty and have asked the United States for drone technology as well as armed drones to do the job itself.

"We do need drones -- unmanned vehicles -- which are capable also of firing missiles," he said.

"Pakistan is capable of handling these drone attacks militarily but we would not like to unnecessarily ratchet up problems with the U.S.," he said.

During his visit, Gates offered a dozen unarmed surveillance drones. Basit said his government was considering the offer but reiterated that Pakistan wanted armed drones.

Gates also urged the Pakistanis to expand military operations to North Waziristan but was told it could take six months to a year before this happened, said Basit.

"If we expand our operations then that will require us to pull out from the eastern border which under the circumstances is not possible," he said, referring to the border with rival India.

"That is a serious issue for us and we hope that at the end of the day our friends, the Americans, will be cognizant of our security perceptions," he said.

Basit complained the United States was behind on delivering funds promised to pay for anti-militant efforts. The United States says Pakistan has denied visas for auditors and other U.S. officials needed to ensure the money is spent properly.

Gates annoyed Pakistan when he said on Wednesday in New Delhi that India may lose its patience with Pakistan after any repeat of a Mumbai-style attacks and militants in the region may use this to provoke the two rivals to war.

"Such a statement was very unhelpful and undiplomatic ... These can be exploited by India," said Basit.

New Delhi is increasingly frustrated at what it sees as Islamabad's failure to bring to justice the masterminds of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks.

It blames militants belonging to the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba group for the attacks that killed 166 people.