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U.S. speeds up direct talks with Taliban

By Karen DeYoung

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The administration has accelerated direct talks with the Taliban, initiated several months ago, that U.S. officials say they hope will enable President Obama to report progress toward a settlement of the Afghanistan war when he announces troop withdrawals in July.

A senior Afghan official said a U.S. representative attended at least three meetings in Qatar and Germany, one as recently as “eight or nine days ago,” with a Taliban official considered close to Mohammad Omar, the group’s leader.

State Department spokesman Michael A. Hammer on Monday declined to comment on the Afghan official’s assertion, saying the United States had a “broad range of contacts across Afghanistan and the region, at many levels. . . . We’re not going to get into the details of those contacts.”

The talks have proceeded on several tracks, including through nongovernmental intermediaries and Arab and European governments. The Taliban has made clear its preference for direct negotiations with the Americans and has proposed establishing a formal political office, with Qatar under consideration as a venue, according to U.S. officials.

An attempt to open talks with the insurgent group failed late last year when an alleged Taliban leader, secretly flown by NATO to Kabul, turned out to be a fraud. “Nobody wants to do that again,” a senior Obama administration official said.

Other earlier meetings between Afghan government representatives and Taliban delegates faltered when the self-professed insurgents could not establish their bona fides as genuine representatives of the group's leadership.

But the Obama administration is "getting more sure" that the contacts currently underway are with those who have a direct line to Omar and influence in the Pakistan-based Quetta Shura, or ruling council, he heads, according to one of several senior U.S. officials who discussed the closely held initiative only on the condition of anonymity.

The officials cautioned that the discussions were preliminary. But they said "exploratory" conversations, first reported in February by the New Yorker magazine, have advanced significantly in terms of the substance and the willingness of both sides to engage.

Rumors of the talks have brought a torrent of criticism in recent weeks from Afghan President Hamid Karzai's political opponents, who say that he will ultimately compromise Afghan democracy. In one indication of U.S. eagerness to get negotiations moving, however, administration officials described the criticism in positive terms as evidence that Afghans were starting to take the idea of negotiations seriously.

The Taliban, one U.S. official said, is "going to have to talk to both the Afghans and the Americans" if the process is to proceed to the point that it would significantly affect the level of violence and provide what the Taliban considers an acceptable share of political power in Afghanistan.

Such an outcome is likely to be years away, officials said. They said that the United States has not changed its insistence that substantive negotiations be Afghan-led. "The Afghans have been fully briefed" on U.S.-Taliban contacts, an American official said, and "the Pakistanis only partially so."

Officials said representatives from the Haqqani network, a group of Afghan fighters based in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal region whom the administration considers particularly brutal and irreconcilable, have had no part in the discussions.

Although U.S. officials have said that Osama bin Laden's killing by American commandos early this month could facilitate progress, initiation of the discussions predate bin Laden's death. During a Feb. 18 speech, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the United States and the Afghan government would no longer insist on a public break between the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda as a precondition for talks. Instead, such a declaration could be made at the end of negotiations.

The U.S. and Afghan governments also insist that any settlement process result in an end to Taliban violence and a willingness to conform to the Afghan constitution, including respect for the rights of women and minorities and the rule of law.

Asked what Obama hoped to announce in July, an official said the president would not offer details of any talks. "It would be something like this," the official said. "Here's my plan on

troops, here's my overall vision for Afghanistan. The secretary [Clinton] said we were going to produce some diplomacy and laid out our desire to speak to the enemy. . . . I want to tell the American people . . . we're making that policy real.' ”

The Taliban has transmitted its own list of demands, most of them long-standing, another official said. They include the release of up to 20 fighters detained at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba — eight of whom are thought to be designated “high value” by the United States and two of whom have been designated for trials by military commissions — withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan, and a comprehensive guarantee of a substantive Taliban role in the Afghan government.

The Taliban proposal of a formal office has raised two immediate questions, one U.S. official said. “One, where is it? Second, what do you call it? Does it say ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’ across the door? No. Some people say you can call it a U.N. support office and the Taliban can go sit there.’ ”

“If the Afghans want it in Kabul, that's okay,” the official said. “If they would support it in Qatar, that's fine.”

Events over the past six months have contributed to the administration's determination to get substantive talks underway as well as its belief that a successful political outcome is possible, even if still years away.

In a November meeting, NATO contributors to the 140,000-troop coalition in Afghanistan — all under economic and political pressure to end the long-running war — set the end of 2014 as the deadline for a complete withdrawal of combat troops. By that time, they said, enough Afghan government forces would be recruited and trained to take over their country's security.

Obama had announced that he would begin drawing down U.S. forces, who form about two-thirds of the international coalition in Afghanistan, in July. The U.S. budget crisis, which prompted the election of more deficit hawks last fall, brought increasing political pressure on the administration to decrease the \$10 billion monthly bill for the war.

On the ground in Afghanistan, Gen. David H. Petraeus, the coalition military commander, has cited increasing progress against Taliban fighters in the south, although there is some disagreement with the U.S. military's conclusion that heavy losses have made the Taliban more amenable to negotiations. U.S. intelligence officials have offered a slightly different interpretation, saying that replacement commanders inside Afghanistan have made the Pakistan-based leadership nervous of losing control over its fighters and more anxious to make a deal.

Officials said senior diplomat Marc Grossman, who was appointed as the administration's special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan after Richard C. Holbrooke's death in December, was told that the White House expected him to concentrate his efforts on a negotiated settlement.

At the same time, U.S. relations with Pakistan — the home base for the leading Afghan Taliban groups — have become increasingly frayed. The endgame in Afghanistan clearly requires Pakistani cooperation, and Grossman began trilateral discussions on the subject with top Afghan and Pakistani diplomats in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, this month. Officials said that he has also visited other regional players interested in talks, including India and Saudi Arabia, and that Iran has been approached through intermediaries.

The administration now thinks that talks with the Quetta Shura and other groups do not necessarily require Pakistan's cooperation.

“Some people who have met with the Taliban say that among the reasons [the insurgents] want to establish their own office is so they can get out from under the Pakistanis,” one senior administration official said