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The Washington Post

Taliban increasingly eyeing its role in politics

By Ernesto Londono

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Although Taliban leaders have denounced Afghanistan's parliamentary election and threatened violence at the polls on Saturday, some are discreetly making overtures to candidates, apparently in hopes of building political clout in Kabul, according to the top United Nations envoy here and some Afghan politicians.

"Any indication that they're moving from bullets to ballots, as imperfect as it might be, is a good indicator," said Staffan de Mistura, who previously served as the top U.N. representative in Iraq and took over here in March.

Speaking in an interview at his Kabul office, de Mistura said insurgent leaders in Afghanistan could be trying to bolster their political standing in anticipation of a reconciliation process Afghan President Hamid Karzai is hoping to jump-start this fall.

"That's exactly the type of thing that happened in Iraq at a certain point," de Mistura said, referring to the period after the 2007 U.S. troop surge, when political factions with armed wings started putting more stock in deal-making than in fighting. "People started discussing, arguing, compromising, negotiating, making deals on a political level, using the political game plan rather than bombs and explosions. In that sense, these elections could be helpful."

Not everyone has such an optimistic interpretation.

Martine van Bijlert, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, said there is little evidence that the Taliban's leadership is interested in playing a formal role in the political system at this point in time.

"They've come out strongly against the election," she said. "They didn't have to. They could have been more ambiguous."

She said any overtures might speak to the evolution of local politics, rather than a softening of the Taliban's position on Afghanistan's U.S.-backed democratic system.

"It probably points in the other direction, with people on the government's side trying to strengthen their ties with the Taliban," she said. "If you want to travel in your area and have someone look after your land, you need to have those links, particularly as the Taliban's influence is on the rise."

Saturday's parliamentary election is seen as a crucial milestone that could restore - or dash - Afghans' faith in the democratic system that was established after the Taliban was driven from power nine years ago. Many Afghans have come to see the government as a corrupt oligarchy with little reach outside the capital - a view reinforced by last year's fraud-tainted presidential election.

More than 2,500 candidates - 406 of them female - are running for 249 seats. Campaigning has unfolded amid rising violence. Three candidates and several campaign workers have been killed, and prospective lawmakers running in Taliban-controlled districts say they have been unable to campaign effectively.

Against this backdrop, de Mistura would not elaborate on the type of political deals Taliban leaders appear to be making or say which candidates have had contact with the Taliban.

"There are meetings between the Taliban and candidates," a senior Western diplomat who has studied the issue said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive issue. "These meetings don't take place to talk about the weather."

Daoud Sultanzoy, a member of parliament from the violence-ridden province of Ghazni said Taliban leaders have shown an unprecedented level of interest in the political process in the run-up to this election.

"It's not an emphatic endorsement of the process yet," he said. "But there are gestures suggesting they want to be on both sides. They're keeping their military options open and gently feeling their way into the political system, opening their horizons and seeing what's there."

International election experts and Afghan politicians say that reaching deals with insurgents is the only way some candidates are able to campaign in Taliban-controlled

districts. Insecurity in the country, they say, is far worse than it was during the 2005 parliamentary election and last year's presidential vote.

"In order for campaigns and candidates to be effective, they need the good graces of local power-brokers or anti-government elements," said Jed Ober, the chief of staff in Kabul of Democracy International, an election monitoring organization.

Khalid Pashtoon, a lawmaker from the southern province of Kandahar, said security threats have prevented him from campaigning outside the provincial capital.

"Zero," he said in a phone interview from his campaign headquarters in Kandahar city. "Not a single visit. I cannot."

He said, however, that candidates who belong to "pro-Taliban tribes," appear to have worked out safe passage agreements.

"No one is harming them," Pashtoon said. "That in itself is an indication that there is sympathy between them."

Earlier this month, the Taliban warned Afghans not to head to the polls and predicted the vote would be rigged by the Americans.

"The election has no credibility in the eye of the common man in spite of the fact that the Americans have spent or are spending large amounts of money and campaigns to bribe people are in full swing," the Taliban said in a statement translated by the SITE Intelligence Group.

De Mistura said the Afghan election commission is better prepared than it has ever been to hold a credible election. The commission said 6,000 election and campaign workers suspected of having committed fraud in last year's presidential election will be barred from participating in this one. It also conducted background checks on poll workers and plans to have more security at polling sites.

"The previous election, it is an understatement to say, they didn't go well," the envoy said, referring to last year's fraud-tainted vote that secured President Hamid Karzai a second term in office.

De Mistura conceded, however, that violence and fraud in the upcoming election have the potential to further undermine Afghans' faith in the government. "We have to lower the expectations," he said. "This is not Switzerland. But they are going to be better than the previous ones."

Karzai is attempting to reach a negotiated truce with the Taliban, an effort the government hopes will gain traction after the election. De Mistura said he had a "hunch" the peace talks would start in earnest between November and December.

"Everybody is getting tired," De Mistura said. "The Taliban are also getting tired and they know they will never win the war. They realize that."