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Reuters

Afghan insurgents say "no hope" for peace talks

By Sayed Salahuddin

10/22/2010

Mid-level Taliban insurgency commanders do not believe their leaders have begun tentative peace talks with the Afghan government, with many vowing on Friday not to give up the fight after nearly 10 years of war.

NATO and Afghan officials have confirmed preliminary contacts between President Hamid Karzai's government and the Taliban, although doubt surrounds when those contacts were made, who they were made with and what, if any, progress was made.

Karzai is pushing a negotiated settlement to the conflict and has launched a High Peace Council which has said it is prepared to offer concessions to bring insurgents to the table, although Kabul and Washington are adamant they must renounce violence.

However, insurgency commanders from across Afghanistan indicated they were not involved in the initial contacts.

"No one has come so far and sat with the government and there is no hope that the Taliban will come and negotiate with the government," said Abdullah Nasrat, the Taliban commander for Girishk district in southern Helmand province, one of the Taliban's traditional strongholds.

Girishk is in the strategically important Helmand River valley, along which mainly U.S. and British forces launched a series of offensives last year.

"We basically hear the reports of talks through the press and do not believe in them," Nasrat told Reuters by telephone. "As long as foreign forces are in Afghanistan, there will be no talks. Our morale is high."

Violence across Afghanistan is at its worst since the Taliban were ousted by U.S.-backed Afghan forces in late 2001. Record civilian and military casualties -- and the possibility of peace talks -- will weigh heavily on U.S. President Barack Obama when he conducts a strategy review of the Afghan war in December.

It will also be a central part of discussions at a NATO summit in Lisbon next month.

The New York Times newspaper on Wednesday quoted an unidentified Afghan source as saying Taliban leaders from the "Quetta shura" -- the leadership of the Afghan Taliban who are based in Pakistan -- and one member of the al Qaeda-linked Haqqani network had taken part in "extensive" talks.

Salahuddin Ayoubi, a senior commander for the Haqqani network's Sirajuddin Haqqani, accused U.S. General David Petraeus, the commander of the almost 150,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, of trying to drive a wedge through the insurgency.

"These (reports) are part of a drama of General Petraeus, who from one side has stepped up the military operations and from other side wants to confuse the minds of the mujahideen by talking about talks," Ayoubi told Reuters.

"There has been no let up in our activities and we have not been told by our leaders to reduce or halt our operations for any reason," he said. Ayoubi also said reports earlier this year that Sirajuddin Haqqani's brother had taken part in talks were untrue.

The Haqqani network has been very active in the east and southeast over the past year and have been blamed for brazen suicide attacks on government targets and foreign troops.

"NO AUTHORITY"

Similar sentiments were expressed across the country.

"Karzai has no authority for making peace and cannot do anything without the order of the foreigners. I do not believe in the reports of the talks," said Feda Mohammad, a Taliban commander in northwest Badghis province.

Commanders for Hezb-i-Islami, run by veteran fighter Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the Haqqani network in southeastern Khost and Paktia provinces near the Pakistan border also said they would continue fighting.

In Kunduz province, which the Taliban have been using as a staging point for increasing attacks in the north and northeast, deputy governor Hamidullah Danesh said he doubted the reports of talks would have much impact on the Taliban insurgency.

However some criminal gangs, including about 60 members of one group, had surrendered in recent weeks, encouraged by government reconciliation efforts and in fear of increased military operations by NATO-led forces.

The High Peace Council said on Thursday it would be willing to make concessions to bring insurgents to the negotiating table, including jobs, homes and cash.

It also called for Saudi Arabia's help in future talks, although there has been no response yet from Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia sponsored secret, but inconclusive, talks last year and has acted as an interlocutor in the past.

Kabul and Washington have long urged that insurgents must first renounce violence and links to al Qaeda and accept the Afghan constitution as a precondition for talks. The Taliban reiterates its main plank, that all foreign troops must leave Afghanistan before talks could be possible.