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U.S. contemplating new program to pay those Taliban who renounce violence

By Abdul Hadi Mayar

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KABUL - U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Wednesday said the United States is ready to do business with what she called good Taliban who agree to join "a peaceful and democratic process."

"We view extremists and terrorists as a syndicate. But not everyone who picks up a gun is a terrorist. We are determined to root out their leadership. But we are also open to those who change their mind and agree to a view, which is peaceful and democratic in manner," she told a joint press conference with her Pakistani counterpart, Shah Mahmud Qureshi, in Islamabad.

Her remarks came amidst reports that in a new approach to the war in Afghanistan, the Obama administration has indicated that it will offer to pay Taliban fighters who renounce insurgency.

President Barack Obama signed a defense bill, which includes a program to win over the loyalties of those Taliban militants, who are ready to join the side of the Afghan government and give up militancy.

It is similar to the Commanders' Emergency Response Program, which is running in Iraq for several years.

The Iraqi model is basically a pool of money that lets commander on ground to response urgent humanitarian request to clear roads, dig wells, and provide other urgent humanitarian assistance to the people.

However, the fund has been used to pay insurgents to basically switch side to join with the Americans by forming local militias to protect their town and villages from hostile people.

Under the program, thousands of fighters were reintegrated into the Iraqi society.

Reports in Western media indicate that now the U.S. administration wants to initiate the same program in Afghanistan.

"Good Taliban? I don't know about good. But people have been caught up in these activities. Let us root out the hard core and look at the people who renounce violence, we should be open and see them case by case," Clinton said.

Clinton visited Pakistan from Oct. 28 to 30.

"Let them come forward and join the political process with their agenda of keeping women back and not allowing girls to schools. Let them make their case. They are losing and are on the wrong side of history," added Clinton.

The United States had tried several years back to test Iraq's Al-Anbar model - under which local tribes in Iraq's Anbar province were provided weapons to guard against insurgents - in Afghanistan.

The program was also copied in the militancy-riddled northwestern Pakistan, where local tribes constituted armed Lashkars (voluntary tribal force) to fight away insurgents. Such Lashkars are still functioning successfully in Swat, Dir, and Mohmand region close to the Afghan border.

Response to the program in Afghanistan has, however, remained poor.

In his latest strategy review, the U.S. and NATO-led ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) commander, General Stanley McChrystal calls for the international forces to concentrate more on protecting Afghan civilians than targeting and killing Taliban and al-Qaida fighters.

Media reports indicate that Washington is also poised to involve Pakistan more hectically in Afghanistan affairs.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmud Qureshi told the news conference that "in coming days a new era of Pak-U.S. relationship will dawn." He added that "a policy shift has occurred in U.S. approach towards Pakistan."

However, he reminded that both countries have reservations about situation in Afghanistan.

Radio Tehran reported the other day that the United States has approached some Pakistani Islamic clerics to use their good books with the Afghan Taliban insurgents to convince them on renouncing insurgency.

The radio quoted Pakistani officials as saying that a U.S. intelligence agency, in collaboration with a Middle East intelligence network, is in contact with five pro-Taliban Pakistani clerics to use their influence with the Afghan Taliban.

It said U.S. intelligence officials will hold talks with these clerics in the United Arab Emirates in the near future.