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Reuters

Afghan Taliban commander rejects U.S. peace push

By Jibrán Ahmad
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A mid-level Afghan Taliban commander, whose fighters held two French journalists hostage for more than a year, said U.S. overtures for peace talks were simply an attempt to divide Islamists.

In a rare insight into the thinking of a Taliban commander, Qari Mahmud Mujahid said the United States was just trying to save face after battlefield losses.

"The blood of thousands of our Mujahideen is bearing fruit and now the U.S. and its allies are begging us to help them find a respectable exit from Afghanistan," he told Reuters in an interview in the Pakistani border town of Chaman.

The United States is eager to stabilize Afghanistan as much as possible before the end of 2014 -- when all NATO combat troops are due home -- and has been stressing the need for all militant groups to pursue peace.

The United States has said it remains open to reaching an accord with insurgents ready to sever ties with al Qaeda, renounce violence and respect the Afghan constitution.

Mujahid, a stern-looking figure who carries a U.S. made pistol, is not part of the top Taliban leadership structure -- he is a commander in Kapisa province, northeast of Kabul.

But his views shed light on how mid-level commanders interpret the American drive for reconciliation.

"This is their (the United States') propaganda to divide our various fighting groups. The Taliban had defeated them on the battlefield and now they are working to find out a respectable exit from Afghanistan," said Mujahid, flanked by guards with AK-47 assault rifles.

On a recent visit to Islamabad, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said it was time to bring all militant groups to the negotiating table.

Violence in Afghanistan is at its worst since 2001, according to the United Nations, although a recent Pentagon report says it is down.

TALIBAN LESS RIGID

The Taliban had grown confident enough to fight during all seasons, said Mujahid, who was dressed in a traditional shalwar qameez, traditional baggy tunic and trousers and a white cap.

Insurgent attacks have tended to fall off in winter as the mountain passes they use to cross from havens in Pakistan become blocked with snow.

Qari Mahmud Mujahid is the Taliban commander's nom de guerre. He did not want his real name used for fear of being captured or killed by Western or Afghan forces.

Mujahid said he became close to reclusive Taliban commander Mullah Mohammad Omar over the years and had spent time in Kandahar, the Taliban heartland, where he once saw Osama bin Laden and several of his Arab militant supporters one night.

After seizing power in Afghanistan in 1996, the Taliban implemented heavily oppressive policies that alienated Afghans.

They publicly executed adulterers and brought back physical punishments including amputation. The Taliban banned television, some sports and most music, arrested men without beards, and beat those who didn't attend prayers.

Women were shut out from most work and study.

There have been hints in statements from former Taliban officials that they may have softened their stance.

Asked what type of rule the Taliban would impose if they took over again, Mujahid, who served his guests dry fruit and tea without sugar, said they would favor a "pure" Islamic system "that would be acceptable to all countries."

"We are not against female education. Once the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has come into power, we would make all arrangements to enable the females to get their education and would ensure all rights to the women, but within the framework of Islam," he said.

Mujahid said his supporters held French journalists Herve Ghesquiere and Stephane Taponier hostage in Afghanistan for a year and a half before they were released in June.

He complained that journalists were not visiting areas under his control to report how the Taliban "restored peace," but reacted angrily when it was suggested it would be too risky.

"The two French journalists you are referring to did not inform us before coming to our areas. They could be spies as the enemy often used to travel in our areas disguised as journalists. We did not know they were journalists," he said.