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## Afghan government ready to resume negotiations with Taliban

By Julian Borger

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### Senior official says talks will restart on condition that insurgents establish a political office first

Kabul - The Afghan government is prepared to resume negotiations with the Taliban despite the assassination of its chief peace envoy, Burhanuddin Rabbani, the senior official responsible for organising the talks has said.

Masoom Stanekzai said talks would restart on condition that the insurgents established a political office first.

Stanekzai was standing next to Rabbani when the former president was killed in his home by an assassin with a bomb concealed in his turban on 20 September. Shrapnel pierced Stanekzai's lung, left arm and both legs.

In his first interview since leaving hospital last week, Stanekzai, who runs the secretariat of Afghanistan's High Peace Council (HPC), said attempts to engage the Taliban in peace talks would continue as soon as Rabbani's successor had been chosen. He added: "There is no alternative to peace."

He said a consultative assembly, or Loya Jirga, had come to the same conclusion on Saturday, but stressed: "[The insurgents] should talk from a clear address.

"They can't say we are here and there, somewhere hiding, when nobody clearly understands whether [the person they are negotiating with] is an authorised representative or just someone who is being hired by a spy agency, doing something to prolong the conflict."

At the time of his death, Rabbani had been trying to organise a deal under which the Taliban established a political office in Qatar. Stanekzai said those efforts should resume, although the precise location of the office would be a matter for discussion.

After the assassination, questions were raised about Rabbani and Stanekzai having agreed to a meeting with someone whose identity was unclear and who had been introduced by go-betweens whose status in the Taliban was also obscure.

"It was stupidity of a big office like that to accept that meeting," Safia Siddiqui, a spokeswoman for the Loya Jirga, said. "This was a young man coming from Quetta [a Pakistan border city that serves as a Taliban headquarters], with no address, and Rabbani came all the way back from Iran to meet him."

Stanekzai, whose job it is to help establish contacts and arrange meetings, denied the HPC had been too hasty in seeking Taliban contacts, arguing that kickstarting a peace process was an urgent necessity.

"From one side, if you look at it technically, it might be seen as a rush. If you look to the last 33 years in Afghanistan, it is not a rush. It is a genuine willingness," he said.

"For the past 33 years, you can't remember a single day when someone isn't killed or injured. We lost two generations in this war."

An investigation into the assassination continues, and a team is due to arrive in Pakistan to investigate the connection to Quetta, where a surviving conspirator, Hamidullah Akhundzada, said the plot had been hatched.

The Afghan government has already blamed Taliban leadership, acting in concert with Pakistani intelligence, for the death – but Stanekzai remained cautious about whether the killing had been an officially sanctioned or rogue operation.

"Until the whole investigation is completed it would be better to wait until we get a final, concrete result," he said.

Two months after the attack, Stanekzai still walks with the help of a crutch and is due to have a second operation on his left ear, in which has lost hearing.

In an interview with a small group of European journalists, he gave his first public account of Rabbani's assassination.

"I remember his last words were that 'unless we create a culture of peace in this country, we will not succeed, and we have to work to broaden to the scope and make this process more inclusive so that everybody can participate and lessen the relevance of those who are fighting,' " he said.

"Then he asked that these people should be brought in from the guest house, and before they arrived I went out to the room where his secretary and my assistant were sitting and I told them no matter whoever is coming they have to be properly checked before they enter in the room.

"They arrived, two people Professor Rabbani stood and said welcome, and I also stood, and they were hugging and I was standing beside them and the blast happened.

"After that I don't know what happened, and when I came back to my senses I was in the hospital."