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Telegraph

Taliban 'want base in neutral third country before peace talks begin'

By Rob Crilly
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Taliban leaders want to open a base in a neutral, third country such as an Arab Gulf state, Turkey or Japan before they embark on meaningful peace talks, according to senior figures in the movement.

In an interview with The Daily Telegraph, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban's former ambassador to Pakistan, said meaningful talks were not possible until insurgent leaders had a safe base from which to negotiate.

"Taliban are condemned by the world. They have no address," he said in the sitting room of the Kabul safe house where he now lives.

"If I was a Taliban I would choose a country close to Afghanistan but neutral, like the United Arab Emirates, somewhere which is not interested in interfering in Afghanistan, like Pakistan or China."

A formal office, he added, would help the Taliban make the transition from fighters to politicians. Mullah Zaeef, once the international face of the Taliban, was arrested after 9/11 and spent almost four years in Guantanamo Bay.

Although he claims no longer to speak for the Taliban, his eventual release and privileged position in Kabul have led analysts to conclude he retains close contacts with his former comrades and that he would act as an intermediary in any peace talks.

Ahmed Rashid, a noted Taliban expert, said he had recently conducted interviews with five former insurgent leaders, who each said the Taliban wanted to open an office in a neutral country – such as one of the Gulf states, Germany, Turkey or Japan – now that their strongholds of Kandahar and Helmand were being hit by teams of special forces.

"They want to be free to have negotiations without the interference of Pakistan or according to an agenda set by Pakistan," he said.

The sentiment will be a blow to Pakistan, which has fostered relations with insurgents in order to retain a stake in any final peace deal.

BLOB Nato has sent an investigation team to Sangin, after reports that three women and two children were killed during a coalition firefight with insurgents.