

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



March 06, 2016

## Taliban, not Ready for Talks

Amongst the hopes that Afghan government would have direct talks with Taliban, a statement from Taliban has been released wherein they have announced that they would not participate in peace talks with the Afghan government, saying their supreme leader had authorized no one to participate in any such parleys. Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has said in a statement, "We explicitly say that the 'Islamic Emirate' has not assigned anyone and the leadership council has not decided about participation in such talks." It has also been claimed in the statement that Taliban's political office in Qatar had not been consulted about the peace talks. Taliban have also reiterated their list of demands they had presented at a Pugwash conference, including withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, removal of their leaders from the UN blacklist and releasing their prisoners were met. They also believe that US stance is hypocritical as on one hand the US is planning to send more troops to Afghanistan besides continuing airstrikes in various areas and actively participating in night raids and on the other arranging meetings to push for peace talks.

It is important to see what would be the response of the Quadrilateral Cooperation Group (QCG) regarding this statement as earlier it had given clear indication that the talks would start from this month. This shows the lack of communication between the Group and the Taliban. If Taliban were not ready for the talks what were the preparations being made for? It is really important that there should be clear stance by the Group and it should be made public as people are totally uncertain about the circumstances.

For Afghanistan the peace talks are of great importance. If there is any lasting peace in the country, it will only be possible through negotiations with Taliban; there is no other option. Especially fighting is no more an option as it has already led to myriads of killings and destruction. Nevertheless, the important factor is that Afghan government should be able to have a comprehensive strategy regarding how to proceed in talks with Taliban, especially when they have already rejected to talk with the Afghan government.

Afghanistan would be faced with myriads of security incidents. Already the security incidents have become the order of the day. Everyday there are tragic news from different parts of the country regarding bombings and ruthless killings by Taliban insurgents. The prospects of peace and tranquility are becoming darker with each passing day. Coupled with that is the fact that the promises of negotiations and reconciliation do not seem to be turning into tangible steps and within such a scenario Afghan civilians are the ones who are suffering the most.

Neither there are steps being taken for paving the way to development that could guarantee provision of basic requirements to the people; nor are there arrangements to guarantee their security. Government authorities mostly blame insecurity as a hurdle towards development and claim that most of their energies and funds are utilized to provide security to the people; therefore, the attentions cannot be focused on other areas. However, the facts and figures show a different picture - the security sector remains unattended as well and insecurity is rampant throughout the country. United Nations (UN) annual report released a couple of weeks earlier depicted that the number of Afghan civilians killed and wounded passed 11,000 in 2015 - the highest number recorded since the United States-led invasion more than 14 years ago.

With the fighting season just starting, it was really encouraging news that there would be some development regarding the peace talks and there may be efforts directed towards a ceasefire in the coming months; however, the prospects of such a deal does not seem feasible now. Therefore, Afghan civilians need to get ready for another extensive fighting season. For Afghan security forces the challenges may increase as they have to face the insurgents with their limited resources. However, the most important point is that they must not lose heart and continue defending their country. The people as a whole must support them so that they are able to counter and defeat the insurgents. If Afghan security forces are able to defeat them substantially, Taliban will have no other option but to return to peace talks ultimately, even with less pride and more readiness.

At the same time Afghan government, as a top priority, needs to reach to a conclusive position regarding terrorism, if it wants to continue its journey towards a democratic and peaceful state. President Ashraf Ghani had clearly indicated that he is serious about the issue and has always called for a regional and global cooperation to eradicate terrorism. Nonetheless, it is more important that Afghanistan must have its strategy bold and clear regarding the issue and must follow the same through actions, not words alone, as there is no more time for words.



## Russia's Increasing Role in Afghanistan

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

With the security deteriorating and the four-way peace initiative finding momentum in Afghanistan, Russia's role over the developments in the country has come under increased attentions. Russia is alarmed by the deterioration of security in Afghanistan and activities of militant groups there such as the Islamic State and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Moscow recently provided a package of 10,000 automatic rifles to Afghanistan to help the country's security forces fight the insurgent groups. Russian officials have promised to expand security cooperation with Kabul and further boost the country's assistance to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Russia has also hinted interests in increasing investments in Afghanistan in areas of constructions, roads, dams and transportation and increasing exports to the country. During a visit of Afghanistan's CEO Abdullah Abdullah this week, Russian officials promised to provide cheaper supply of electricity to Afghanistan. The heightened Russian efforts to expand economic and security relations with Afghanistan is suggesting that Moscow seeks to have a more active presence in the Post-NATO Afghanistan to help combat militant groups threatening Central Asia.

This is while Moscow has been at odds with the United States over many of the global conflicts and the rivalry has been steadily intensifying with the deteriorating situation in Syria. However, Russia and the United States have been cooperating over the conflict in Afghanistan all over since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Since the fall of the Taliban, regime in 2001, the US has been spearheading the international alliance to fight the Al-Qaeda, Taliban and other militants in the country. Despite being often critique of the US approach in Afghanistan, Russia has been pleased with the US and its allies tackling the Taliban insurgency and currently suppressing jihadist groups such as the Islamic State and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. When the US started to gradually disengage from the conflict in Afghanistan ahead of 2014, the unfinished task of the international coalition remained a concern for Russia. Due to this, Russia sought to play a more active role in the country and started boosting supports to the government of Afghanistan.

One of the key issues that shaped Russian approach in last over a decade to the conflict in Afghanistan was the presence of the United States in the country as the lead country in the fight against terrorism. Despite being happy with the US-led coalition tackling the insurgency and drugs in Afghanistan, Russia grew more pessimistic to the prolonged US presence and the unresolved conflict in its vicinity. As the crises swept Ukraine and Syria, two areas where the interests of Russia and the West, particularly the US, collided, the rifts between Washington and Moscow widened. This had impacts for the two country's cooperation on Afghanistan too. A recent piece in New York Times said that Russia was "pulling back from cooperating with US on Afghanistan". According to NY Times, Russian officials have been expressing exhaustions with the US policies in Afghanistan since the relations between the two world powers had further

strained on conflicts in Syria and elsewhere.

Viewing the nature of cooperation between the US and Russia over war and peace issues in Afghanistan through the status of relations between Moscow and Washington is largely misleading. Russia and the US, as Russian Prime Minister put it, have slipped into another era of cold war, with the Syrian conflict dividing the world powers into two rival, if not hostile, blocks. However, the situation in Afghanistan is completely different and the two sides remain cognizant of the fact that Afghanistan requires cooperation from both sides. The opportunity in Afghanistan is that the country has not been serving as a ground for rivalries between Russia and the United States, rather both Moscow and Washington have been pleased with the presence of the another side. Russia has always been calling the Western alliance not to leave behind an unfinished task in Afghanistan which could later turn into a threat to Russia's interests in the region. However, this has come true now, and the emergence of a new spectrum of militant groups is posing increased threats to Russian interests in Afghanistan and the Central Asia.

The recent deterioration of security in Afghanistan has alarmed both Russia and the US. With Washington pondering over the pace of withdrawal of its remaining forces, Russia is considering how best to help Afghanistan to tackle the growing insurgency and contain expansion of the militants' offensives into the north. The recent provision of automatic rifles by Russia to the Afghan army was in line with Russia's increased efforts to help the country contain fresh wave of violence expected to target the north and other parts of the country in the coming spring and summer seasons. Russia has moved to step up cooperation with the government of Afghanistan not only in areas of security and defense but also combating drug trafficking and improving Afghanistan's economy. The country's hints to increase economic cooperation with Afghanistan and increase investments in the country is also a major component of Russia's new approach in post-NATO Afghanistan.

The new peace efforts of the Afghan government through seeking talks with the Taliban through the four-nation initiative - comprised of Afghanistan, Pakistan, US and China - has excluded Russia. Russia does not seem to be happy with its exclusion from the peace efforts in Afghanistan. Moscow has openly criticized US role in the peace efforts in Afghanistan, with an aide to Russian president Vladimir Putin and his envoy to Afghanistan saying "we're already tired of joining anything Washington starts. The Kremlin has no desire to participate in what the Americans organize 'on the fly' just for their own pre-election interests and where they give us the role of extras on the set." However, Moscow has backed the initiative by calling the Taliban to join the talks and insisting that the only option for the militants was to come to table of negotiations with the government of Afghanistan. This mixes and conflicted signals suggest growing anxieties in Moscow over the growing situation in Afghanistan and the many unsuccessful and uncompleted US war and peace efforts in the country.

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## Controversy over Peace Talk

By Hujjatullah Zia

The Afghan-Pak relation has thawed in recent months and Pakistan will host the first round of direct peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban elements and other insurgents likely to be held this month. The four-nation group, comprises Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the United States, have been working to revive the peace process that stalled last year following the revelation of Mullah Omar's death, who had been dead for over two years. The fourth meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) on resuming negotiation in Kabul on February 23, 2016 agreed on the venue for the dialogue, but stayed short of announcing a date.

Pakistan's Adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz said publicly that the Afghan Taliban's leadership enjoys shelter inside Pakistan, which is used as a "lever" to pressure the group into coming to the negotiating table. This admission comes as Pakistan has been officially denying Taliban's safe haven in its soil and influence over them, whose 14-year-insurgency against Afghan and NATO forces has claimed tens of thousands of civilian and military lives. Speaking at the Council on Foreign Affairs in Washington on Tuesday, Express Tribune Newspaper quoted him as saying, "We have some influence on them because their leadership is in Pakistan and they get some medical facilities, their families are here. So we can use those levers to pressurize them to say, 'Come to the table'."

Aziz said Islamabad had used the threat of expulsion to force the Taliban into the first round of talks. "We already - before the 7th July meeting last year - we had to use some of these levers and restricted their movements, restricted their access to hospital and other facilities, and threatened them that if you do not come forward and talk, then obviously we will at least expel you .... We are not the actual negotiators. So I hope as we go along our sincerity in this task will be recognized, and with the hope that Afghan government will play a more active role for the success of these talks," he is cited as saying.

However, a former Taliban leader Syed Akbar Agha dubbed the four-nation talks in Islamabad and Kabul as "ineffective" for the discussion remained hidden from the nation and Taliban representatives were not present in the talks. He said, "Both the warring sides should show flexibility in stance on making the peace process effective. If the government accepts some legal demands of Taliban, I believe the peace process would succeed." He believed that despite being divided into different parties, the Taliban were united in demand stance over foreign troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan. He also appreciated the appointment of Syed Ahmad Gilani as the new chief of the High Peace Council (HPC) for his good relation with the Taliban and the government and disengagement in any conflicts. Agha said that if the HPC functioned as a legal and independent body, it could play a significant role in the peace process.

Taliban announced their preconditions in Doha on January 23, which include complete withdrawal of the foreign forces from Afghanistan, official recognition of Taliban's political office in Qatar, removal of Taliban from United Nations terrorist blacklist, halt to the arrest and elimination of Taliban and release of the Taliban inmates from prisons. It is also said that Taliban have asked for establishing interim government. Will Afghanistan accept the preconditions, which has no legal basis?

It is said that the National Unity Government (NUG) shows tendency towards amending the constitution and acceptance of the Taliban's aforementioned preconditions. Qutbuddin Hilal said to a Pakistani Newspaper, "The national unity government is willing to discuss amendments to the constitution, help remove names of Taliban leaders from a UN sanctions list, reopen the Taliban political office in Qatar and release their prisoners." However, he added that Afghan President denied the establishment of interim government and stated that Taliban elements no longer persist on immediate withdrawal of foreign forces. It is self-explanatory that peace talk has generated controversy in abundance within more than a decade. It is believed that accepting the Taliban's preconditions, mainly releasing their prisoners, has no legal basis since they inflicted heavy casualties on Afghan combatants and non-combatants alike. The victims' families will never absolve the Taliban of spilling the blood of their near and dear ones. There is no doubt that Afghan nation suffered painfully under the Taliban regime and militancy continues unabated despite the regime's fall.

Moreover, a number of Taliban prisoners, who were released during Hamid Karzai's administration, rejoined the battle and fought against the Afghan soldiers. Hence, the government must ensure that in case of being freed, the Taliban members will not turn back to the battles and the warring parties will cease insurgency. Pakistan offered to host the first round of direct talks between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives following the QCG's fourth round meeting and it is tasked to bring ten Taliban's high-ranking figures to the negotiating table. As Pakistan frequently pushed for resuming peace talk as a gesture of goodwill, it has to nudge the Taliban to hold negotiation with Afghan government and give up inflicting further casualties on our nation. Although Taliban lay much emphasis on their preconditions, it is Pakistan to put pressure on them by using the "levers" and influence.

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