

Table of Contents

<u>THE AFGHAN MISSION</u> What the increasingly confident Taliban want in exchange for peace.....	1
<u>POLITICS</u> Taliban's key ally is also an everyman.....	4

THE AFGHAN MISSION What the increasingly confident Taliban want in exchange for peace

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 072550245
DATE: 2007.09.12
PAGE: A1 (ILLUS)
BYLINE: GRAEME SMITH
SECTION: International News
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN
WORDS: 1183
WORD COUNT: 1176

GRAEME SMITH KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN The Taliban and their allies say they are ready to accept President Hamid Karzai's invitation to peace talks, but with tough conditions that show the insurgents' rising confidence about bargaining with the embattled Afghan government.

The Taliban's demands include an immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops and a rewrite of the Afghan constitution, according to interviews The Globe and Mail has conducted with key figures who would be integral to any political settlement.

Hope for negotiations surfaced after Mr. Karzai said on Sunday that he wants to talk with the insurgents – a statement he has made with increasing frequency as the violence rises. But this time, the Taliban took the unusual step of answering the President, issuing a statement on Monday saying they are prepared to meet with him.

Kabul is investigating the Taliban's invitation, a presidential spokesman said yesterday, adding that insurgents who want to negotiate will not be arrested.

But Kabul will need to make more substantial promises to get talks started, said Qari Yousef Ahmadi, a Taliban spokesman, reached by telephone at an undisclosed location.

"The government hasn't made any serious attempt to talk with us," Mr. Ahmadi said. "If they want to talk, we have two demands: All foreign troops must leave, and we must have an Islamic democracy in Afghanistan." The Taliban spokesman was vague about his definition of Islamic democracy. Afghanistan's constitution already defines it as an Islamic republic, but it also sets aside a quarter of seats in parliament for women and makes other provisions that give the country a more moderate character than it had under the Taliban.

"The United States brought democracy to Afghanistan, but it was un-Islamic," Mr. Ahmadi said. "We need democracy, but under the laws of Islam." Although he did not elaborate, he mentioned that another insurgent group has been thinking along similar lines: Hizb-i-Islami, the largest band of gunmen that fights alongside the Taliban.

That group's leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, recently gave a video response to questions from a researcher for The Globe and Mail, outlining his requirements for a ceasefire.

Like the Taliban, the old warlord listed the removal of foreign troops as his first demand.

But he also offered a more detailed political scheme: "Afghan people must sit together and reach the decision that the foreign troops should leave," he said. "The Americans must accept this, and they must leave. We will never participate in meetings in which they don't discuss this issue." He continued: "Power should be handed over to a temporary government, and they will have a meeting of tribal elders, a new constitution, and work under Islamic rules. We should have real and fair elections, which follow Islamic rules. Under these circumstances, I am ready for negotiations." Both Mr. Hekmatyar and Mr. Ahmadi remain in hiding; the former has been designated by the United States as a terrorist and supporter of al-Qaeda.

The name Ahmadi is likely a pseudonym, sometimes assumed by different Taliban spokesmen in hopes of avoiding the fate of their predecessors who have been killed or captured.

This points to one of many hurdles for a political settlement: The United Nations has formally designated the Taliban and other insurgent groups in Afghanistan as terrorists, making it politically and legally difficult for the Kabul government to reach a compromise.

"If they're labelled as terrorists, how can they talk?" said Maulana Fazlur Rahman, who heads one of Pakistan's largest religious parties, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, which voices support for the Taliban but disavows any direct link with violence.

"The key lies in the hands of the Americans," Mr. Rahman said during an interview earlier this month in Islamabad.

"They should empower the Afghan government to talk with the Taliban.

But the atmosphere is not yet conducive." The Taliban spokesman agreed that the terrorist designation might hamper talks. During recent negotiations with the government of South Korea for the release of hostages, Mr. Ahmadi said, the Taliban believed that the United States was trying to stop the discussion because it violated the principle of not negotiating with terrorists.

In the end, however, the success of the Korean talks shows pragmatism can overcome such objections, Mr. Ahmadi said.

Canadian military officials in Kandahar have said they do not talk with the Taliban under any circumstances, although their NATO allies have not been as firm. The Dutch military in neighbouring Uruzgan province openly describe talks with insurgents as part of their strategy, and many observers viewed the British military's failed peace deal last year in Musa Qala district as an agreement with the Taliban.

In Ottawa, the Conservative government's Foreign Minister, Maxime Bernier, recently criticized the South Korean government for negotiating with the Taliban for the release of hostages.

"We do not negotiate with terrorists, for any reason," he said.

"Such negotiations, even if unsuccessful, only lead to further acts of terrorism." New Democratic Party Leader Jack Layton, however, has long called for negotiating an end to the war, while the Liberals have not been vocal on the issue.

So far, the only publicized method for reaching out to the Taliban has been the Peace Through Strength program, a mediation effort aimed at encouraging defections from the insurgency. The program has suffered a lack of funding, however, and cannot offer the Taliban very much except a written promise of immunity from prosecution.

"Karzai wants us to get letters, and be free to sit at home," Mr. Ahmadi said. "This is silly, it's not acceptable."

Whatever compromise might eventually be accepted by the Taliban would probably be hard for the international community to swallow, Mr. Rahman said.

"The West accepts Islam as a religion, but not as a state system, and this is unfortunate," he said.

***** Opinions on Afghan negotiations Qari Yousef Ahmadi Spokesman, on whether the Taliban would accept a government in Kabul that isn't led by Mullah Mohammed Omar .

"We don't care who is leader, as long as he is a good Muslim." Maulana Fazlur Rahman Head of Pakistan's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party, which voices support for the Taliban. "From the first day of this war, I have been saying that a negotiation is the only solution." Gulbuddin Hekmatyar Leader of the largest band of gunmen allied with the Taliban.

"We are talking with all groups that want independence for Afghanistan.

With Taliban and others we already had some meetings, and still we continue our meetings. We want to collect all the independence groups together into one group, to have one aim, one target. We aren't yet successful with this, but we are trying, and I'm sure it will happen." Hamid Karzai President of Afghanistan "For the security and prosperity of the Afghan people, in order to be freed from al-Qaeda and terrorists and their inhuman actions, we are ready for any type of discussion and negotiations." Maxime Bernier Canadian Foreign Minister "We do not negotiate with terrorists, for any reason. Such negotiations, even if unsuccessful, only lead to further acts of terrorism."

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan

SUBJECT TERM: strife; peace; political; government; reform; religion; statements; list

PERSONAL NAME: Hamid Karzai

ORGANIZATION NAME: Taliban

POLITICS Taliban's key ally is also an everyman

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 072550244
DATE: 2007.09.12
PAGE: A21
BYLINE: GRAEME SMITH
SECTION: International News
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: Islamabad PAKISTAN
WORDS: 367
WORD COUNT: 371

GRAEME SMITH ISLAMABAD When a bus full of South Korean aid workers was captured by the Taliban in the badlands of central Afghanistan this summer, the Korean government sent envoys to a more civilized setting to cut a deal: the heart of Islamabad, with its trim lawns and well-kept flowerbeds.

The Koreans met with Maulana Fazlur Rahman, leader of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, one of Pakistan's largest religious parties. He was persuaded by their pleas, he says, and issued a public request to the Taliban that they not kill more hostages. In the end, 21 of 23 escaped alive, and the Korean government sent Mr. Rahman a thank-you letter for his assistance.

"I launched an appeal, and they stopped the killings," Mr. Rahman says proudly.

The JUI runs a network of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of religious schools across Pakistan, where students are taught the austere Deobandi school of Islam – and, allegedly, some are recruited by the Taliban.

A spokesman for the insurgents described Mr. Rahman yesterday as somebody "with good ideas." For his part, Mr. Rahman denies any operational links with the Taliban, saying he only supports their cause with his words, not actions. But it's clear that any effort to find a negotiated solution to the Afghan insurgency will require the blessing of this man, who has emerged as the Taliban's most prominent political ally.

For somebody with such power over the Taliban, though, Mr. Rahman hardly fits the image of an extremist. Paunchy but nimble, he steps quickly into the living room of his apartment and drops onto the couch beside his foreign guest, offering a greeting with a pat on the shoulder in the manner of a favourite uncle.

The guard in the hallway with a rifle is the only clue in the apartment to Mr. Rahman's stature. Otherwise, the place feels comfortably cluttered, with newspapers and empty pop bottles scattered on the dressers and floor, fake greenery standing in a vase, and kitschy wall hangings made of plastic fruit and wooden trellis.

Mr. Rahman answers all of his guest's questions with unfailing politeness, then scurries off to meet a television crew, winking on his way out the door.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Pakistan; South Korea

SUBJECT TERM: strife; hostages; religion; political; biography

PERSONAL NAME: Maulana Fazlur Rahman

ORGANIZATION NAME: Taliban; Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam