
AFGHANISTAN INCHING CLOSER TO PEACE DEAL WITH WARLORD DEEMED 'GLOBAL TERRORIST' BY US

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Four people were killed when a suicide bomber wearing a police uniform detonated a car bomb inside a police training center in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan on Saturday morning, a local official said.

Taliban claims it shot down US drone in Afghanistan

Taliban fighters said on social media that they shot down a U.S. drone this week over Afghanistan's volatile region near the Pakistan border.

Afghanistan executes 6 militants, signaling tougher policy

The Afghan government has executed six people convicted of carrying out terrorist attacks, a presidential statement said Sunday.

KABUL, Afghanistan □ President Ashraf Ghani is inching closer to a peace deal with the leader of a militant group that, though largely inactive now, was a powerful force during Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s.

However, a spokesman for the president said Sunday that Ghani has held off on completing the 25-point peace plan with warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami group because of "minor

differences."

Dawa Khan Menapal, the spokesman, said, "This is a process. There are some minor differences. It may take one day, maybe weeks or even longer." The talks got underway in 2014.

Hekmatyar has been a thorn in the government's side since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. But his group has been only marginally active in recent years. Its last major attack occurred in 2013, when a suicide bombing killed 15 people, including six American soldiers.

Still, Ghani has been pursuing a peace plan with Hekmatyar, one that political analysts say would serve as a potential blueprint for a far more complicated deal with Taliban insurgents.

Among other things, a draft of the deal with Hekmatyar would recognize Hezb-i-Islami as a legitimate political opposition group. The plan would also lead to the release of political prisoners and allow Hezb-i-Islami fighters to join the nation's army and police forces.

The deal, which U.S. officials are encouraging, would be a symbolic victory for Ghani at a time when Afghans are losing confidence in his government's ability to pull the country out of 15 years of war.

"If the draft is implemented without much change, things will move on the right direction," said Mohammad Nateqi, a political analyst and former Afghan diplomat. "People need and deserve peace, and whatever small or big steps can be taken in this regard can open a window of hope for peace."

Though they support the talks, U.S. officials stopped short of fully endorsing a demand by Hekmatyar to have his name removed from a list of "global terrorists" and for the U.S. Treasury Department to unfreeze his assets overseas.

"The United States supports an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process for a negotiated resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan," a State Department statement said.

The statement added that the United States is prepared to work with international officials toward "considering" a lifting of sanctions if the peace deal includes provisions that require the Hezb-i-Islami to sever ties with international terrorist organizations, renounce violence and support rights

for women and minorities.

For his part, Hekmatyar is demanding a timetable for the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, a softer stance than his previous refusals to engage in talks until all troops were already gone.

But in the face of ongoing Taliban attacks, both Afghan and U.S. officials have been reluctant to deliver a timetable for a complete withdrawal of the about 10,000 foreign troops who remain in Afghanistan as part of the U.S.-led military operation.

Afghan political analysts were, nonetheless, optimistic that a deal with Hekmatyar will soon be reached.

Part of the talks have included the government's willingness to repatriate Hezb-i-Islami refugees living in Pakistan and place them in a new township to be built in Kabul, an Afghan official said.

Hekmatyar would also be designated as a consultant to the government, an offer that the former warlord who once stormed Afghan cities repeatedly in a quest for power might have scoffed at in his youth.

Now Hekmatyar, who is in his 60s and is said to be ailing, may be willing to take the offer, while Ghani can hold up the deal as proof of his efforts to bring peace in the region, said Kamal Nasir Osoli, a member of the Afghan parliament.

"I think after spending 37 years mostly in Pakistan, part of it in Iran and in Afghanistan, Hekmatyar is exhausted and has realized that war cannot solve the problems," the lawmaker said. "The government cannot guarantee removal of his name from the international list of terrorists but can try and is trying."

Kaynak/Source: