
U.S., TALIBAN AGREE IN PRINCIPLE TO AFGHAN PEACE 'FRAMEWORK'

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U.S. and Taliban officials have agreed in principle to the "framework" of a peace deal, U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad said after five days of talks between the militant group and the United States in Qatar.

Both sides have said "progress" had been made in the talks aimed at ending the 17-year conflict in Afghanistan.

We have a draft of the framework that has to be fleshed out before it becomes an agreement, Khalilzad said in an interview with The New York Times in Kabul on January 28.

In the framework, the militants agree to prevent Afghan territory from being used by groups such as Al-Qaeda to stage terrorist attacks.

That could lead to a full pullout of U.S. combat troops, but only in return for the Taliban entering talks with the Afghan government and agreeing to a lasting cease-fire.

The Taliban "committed, to our satisfaction, to do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals," Khalilzad was quoted as saying.

"We felt enough confidence that we said we need to get this fleshed out, and details need to be worked out," he added, according to The New York Times.

The Western-backed government in Kabul has struggled to fend off a resurgent Taliban and other militant groups.

The Taliban has so far refused to hold direct negotiations with Afghan government officials, whom they dismiss as "puppets."

In separate comments made at a meeting with the Afghan media in Kabul on January 28, Khalilzad said, "I have encouraged the Taliban to engage in direct talks with the Afghan government. It is our policy to get to intra-Afghan talks."

The militants have said they will only begin talks with the government once a firm date for the withdrawal of U.S. troops has been agreed.

In a televised address on January 28, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani called on the Taliban to enter

serious negotiations with the government in Kabul and "accept Afghans' demand for peace.

"Either they join the great nation of Afghanistan with a united voice, or be the tool of foreign objectives," he told the militant group.

Ghani spoke after Khalilzad briefed him and other Afghan officials in Kabul on the six-day talks he held with Taliban representatives in the Qatari capital, Doha, last week.

The president's office quoted Khalilzad as saying he had held talks about the withdrawal of foreign troops and a possible cease-fire, but nothing was agreed upon.

"The U.S. insisted in their talks with the Taliban that the only solution for lasting peace in Afghanistan is intra-Afghan talks," Khalilzad said, according to a statement.

"My role is to facilitate" such talks between the insurgents and Kabul, Khalilzad was quoted as saying.

The U.S. envoy said on January 26 that the United States and the Taliban had made "significant progress," adding that the Doha talks were "more productive than they have been in the past."

He also emphasized that the sides have a number of issues left to work out, and that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

Meanwhile, acting U.S. Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan said peace talks between the United States and the Taliban were "encouraging."

"I'd say really the takeaway right now: it's encouraging," Shanahan said at the Pentagon.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that while there was "progress" at the meetings, reports of an agreement on a cease-fire were "not true."

Mujahid also said in a statement that talks about "unresolved matters" will continue.

Until the withdrawal of international troops was hammered out, "progress in other issues is impossible," he insisted.

Another round of peace talks between the Taliban and the United States was tentatively set for February 25, the Reuters news agency quoted a Qatari Foreign Ministry official as saying on January 28.

U.S. officials have said President Donald Trump wants to withdraw about half of the 14,000 US troops in Afghanistan.

In reaction to the report, a senior Italian defense source was quoted by Reuters as saying that Italy was also considering pulling its troops out of Afghanistan within a year.

"The time frame could be 12 months," the source said.

Italy is currently committed to having 900 troops in Afghanistan as part of a NATO-led mission.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-envoy-briefs-afghan-president-on-peace-talks-with->

taliban/29735424.html

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