
PAKISTAN PM TO QATAR TO DISCUSS AFGHAN PEACE

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AFP, February 06, 2012 ISLAMABAD: Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani heads to Qatar on Monday to discuss Afghan peace efforts in the ultra-rich Gulf state where the Taliban and US officials have begun preliminary contacts. Pakistan, which last week sought to reach out to Afghanistan following a period of particularly bad relations over violence plaguing both countries, insists that any process to end the 10-year war in Afghanistan be Afghan-led. President Hamid Karzai is believed to have felt sidelined by contacts between the United States and the Taliban, who are leading an increasingly deadly insurgency against his government and 130,000 US-led foreign troops. Islamabad has officially billed Gilani's three-day visit to Qatar as an opportunity to boost ties and maximise trade. "He will meet among others the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani and Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jabr Al-Thani," foreign ministry spokesman Abdul Basit said. "The prime minister's visit is aimed at opening new vistas for enhanced mutual cooperation and activating the existing structured mechanisms and institutional linkages," he added. The Taliban confirmed last month that they planned to set up a political office in Qatar ahead of possible talks with the United States. Contacts between both sides have already begun, focused on a possible prisoner exchange. "There are certain ideas and suggestions on Afghan reconciliation and when Prime Minister Gilani meets Qatar's leadership, these will certainly come under discussion," a senior Pakistani official told AFP on condition of anonymity. "The Americans have been briefing us on all developments aimed at pushing forward the peace process in Afghanistan and we have clearly told them that Islamabad strictly adheres to a policy of non-interference," he added. Pakistan's role in Afghanistan is regarded with deep suspicion in Western capitals given its long-standing ties to the Taliban, Haqqani network and other Islamist fighters, whose leaders are based in Pakistan. But for the same reason, no peace in Afghanistan will be considered lasting without Pakistan's support and involvement. Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar said last week that Pakistan was willing to do whatever the Afghans wanted to end the war, but insisted the process should not be led by the Americans or any other foreign power. The senior official said it was "important to engage all Afghan factions including Taliban in the process to achieve a lasting peace". Khar visited Kabul last week and sought to refute perceptions that Islamabad was an obstacle to peace, and denied accusations in a leaked NATO report that her country was secretly supporting the Taliban. Kabul has given its blessing to the Taliban office in Qatar, but has insisted on a central role in any negotiations. The militia has denied any plans to hold separate talks with the Afghan government in Saudi Arabia, which Pakistan had reportedly offered to assist. Asked how Pakistan viewed the Taliban's office in Qatar, the official said: "now they have an address and all those wanting peace can have a contact."