

RELEASE IN
PART B6

From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
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Subject: Fw: NYT on U.S. Outreach to Taliban

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A-Rod story is public.

From: Misko, Sean A
Sent: Thursday, May 26, 2011 03:14 PM
To: Sullivan, Jacob J; Ruggiero, Frank J; Singh, Vikram J
Subject: NYT on U.S. Outreach to Taliban

Jake - FYI. Frank suggests discussing this when you speak at 5:00pm.

Sean

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May 26, 2011

U.S. Has Held Meetings With Aide to Taliban Leader, Officials Say

By CARLOTTA GALL and RUHULLAH KHAPALWAK

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — American officials have met with a senior aide to the fugitive Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, at least three times in recent months in the first direct exploratory peace talks, officials in the region said.

The meetings have been facilitated by Germany and Qatar but American officials have been present at the meetings each time, meeting with Tayeb Agha, who is a close personal assistant to Mullah Omar, the officials said. Officials of the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department have been involved in the meetings, one official said.

The meetings were first reported by the Washington Post last week and the German magazine Der Spiegel. A senior Afghan official and Western officials working in the region confirmed the reports on condition of anonymity because they were not permitted to talk to the media about the issue.

Initiated well before the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2, the meetings represent a clear shift in the attitude of the Obama administration toward peace talks with the Taliban first signaled by a speech in February by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Western officials said. In that speech Ms. Clinton said that previous requirements for talks could be considered as “desired outcomes,” opening the way to exploratory meetings without preconditions.

The presence of Mr. Agha, who is a longtime personal assistant of the reclusive Taliban leader, is a sign that the Taliban are serious despite their public opposition to peace talks, the officials said. Through spokesmen and in emailed statements the Taliban have always rejected peace talks until foreign forces leave Afghanistan. But privately, through intermediaries, they have insisted on direct meetings with United States officials, which would give them official recognition of their movement.

Mr. Agha speaks English and Arabic, and has been easily identified, avoiding the false start that occurred last year when an imposter posed as the Taliban commander Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour in meetings with Afghans and NATO officials. Mr. Agha is reported to have attended a dinner hosted by the king of Saudi Arabia several years ago, which was seen as the first American sanctioned overture toward the Taliban.

Yet the senior Afghan official cautioned that the meetings may not represent much since Mr. Agha is known to be no longer particularly close to Mullah Omar. He was a much trusted personal assistant, answering phone calls and making appointments for Mullah Omar, for most of the time the Taliban were in power from 1994 to 2001. Now in his late 30s, he is thought to have lived in Quetta, Pakistan, since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, and to remain in touch with the Taliban leader. Yet his authority to speak for the insurgents remains unclear.

Mullah Omar's ability to control the increasingly radicalized insurgent commanders and groups allied with the Taliban also remains in question. He is still the spiritual leader of the Taliban movement, and certainly retains strong command over Taliban forces in southern Afghanistan, which represent the bulk of the insurgency. Yet the increasingly radical Pakistani Taliban groups that send insurgents to Afghanistan and the Haqqani family, who run their own fiefdom in Pakistan's tribal areas, have disregarded Mullah Omar's orders in the past despite swearing allegiance to him.

The meetings have been conducted without the participation of Pakistan, which has long called for negotiations with the Taliban as a way to end the war on its Western border and which has insisted that it also be included at the negotiating table. Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, even offered President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan his help in bringing Taliban insurgent leaders, who are widely known to use Pakistan's tribal area as a sanctuary, to the negotiating table.

Yet Pakistan is regarded with suspicion by Kabul, and increasingly by Washington and other NATO capitals, because of its longtime support for the Taliban, and those working on contacts with the Taliban have sought to draw them away from Pakistan's controlling influence. One issue under discussion is the opening of a representative office for the Taliban in a third country, possibly Turkey or Qatar.

"You cannot do reconciliation without Pakistan, but also they can be a spoiler," said one European diplomat in the region. The diplomat spoke to a journalist on condition of anonymity in keeping with diplomatic protocol.

The Obama administration is instead conducting parallel but separate dialogues: one between the United States, Afghanistan and the Taliban; and a second between the United States, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pakistan appears to be satisfied with this track so far and sent its senior most bureaucrat in the Pakistani foreign ministry, Salman Bashir, to the latest round of trilateral talks in Kabul Tuesday.

Mr. Bashir, whose brother, Adm. Noman Bashir, is commander of Pakistan's Navy, is known to work closely with the Pakistani military establishment, which has increasingly assumed control of foreign policy from the civilian government in recent months.

In Kabul Mr. Bashir strongly endorsed the efforts of President Karzai and the people of Afghanistan to promote peace. "There is increasing recognition that the way forward is to promote reconciliation, peace and stability," he told journalists.

Pakistan has delayed implementing a trade transit agreement, which was pushed through by United States special envoy to the region, Richard C. Holbrooke, last year before his death, but the two countries have now agreed to put the treaty into operation by June 12, according to a statement by the American diplomat present at the meeting, E. Anthony Wayne.

Germany, which has troops deployed in northern Afghanistan, has led the process with the Taliban and hosted some meetings, while Qatar has hosted another, according to the officials.

A spokesman at the German foreign ministry in Berlin could not confirm that any meetings occurred, but officials interviewed said a number of meetings had taken place, moderated by Germany's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Michael Steiner. Mr. Steiner had worked with Mr. Holbrooke on the Dayton Accords to end the war in Bosnia and was asked by the American diplomat to chair the 50-member contact group for Afghanistan.

European countries with troops in Afghanistan have been keen to start a process of negotiation with the Taliban as part of an exit strategy for some years, but the process barely moved until the Obama administration shifted gears on reconciliation in the last few months, one Western official said.

Carlotta Gall reported from Islamabad, Pakistan and Ruhullah Khapalwak from Kabul, Afghanistan.

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