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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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From: OpsNewsTicker
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Subject: Family pleads for US prisoner at heart of Afghan peace push (Reuters)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The family of Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. soldier held prisoner by the Taliban since 2009, says it is frustrated that more than a year of covert diplomacy has been unable to free their son and is urging President Barack Obama's administration to push harder for his release.

Bob Bergdahl, speaking out about his son's case after a long silence, said he hopes U.S. negotiators will press ahead with efforts to set in motion a chain of events intended in part to lead to the release of his son, believed to be held in Pakistan since he went missing in eastern Afghanistan in June 2009.

The missing soldier's fate is tied up in U.S. efforts to broker a peace deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government, a high-level, high-risk diplomatic initiative which appeared to be on the cusp of a breakthrough before the Taliban suspended initial talks in March.

"We believe that Bowe's specific situation is not being addressed," Bergdahl told Reuters in an interview.

He said he and his wife Jani are disappointed that their son, now 26, remains in danger after almost three years of Taliban captivity. Bergdahl was stationed in Afghanistan's Paktika province, a hotbed of militant activity, when he disappeared under uncertain circumstances on June 30, 2009.

The family appears even more frustrated that prospects for progress appear to have dimmed in Washington, where the idea of negotiating with the shadowy militant group has exposed the White House to political attack just months before elections.

For months, U.S. negotiators were seeking to arrange the transfer of five Taliban detainees held at Guantanamo Bay military prison to the Gulf state of Qatar. The transfer was intended as one of a series of confidence-building measures designed to open the door to political talks between the Taliban and Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government.

That move - a central part of the U.S. strategy for ending the long, costly conflict in Afghanistan - was also supposed to lead directly to Bowe's release. The Taliban has consistently called for the United States to release those held at Guantanamo Bay in exchange for Western prisoners.

Reuters was the first news organization to report the details of the peace deal last year, and has withheld Bowe Bergdahl's role in that arrangement until now.

PROPOSAL AT A HALT

But the Guantanamo transfer proposal, which would have required notification to Congress, ground to a halt when the Taliban rejected U.S. conditions designed to ensure transferred Taliban would not slip away and re-emerge as military leaders.

While most American officials do not expect that proposal to be taken up again in earnest in the months leading up to the Nov. 6 presidential election, they are exploring alternative steps they hope might rekindle the process.

The prospect of a quick start to peace talks grows more unlikely just as questions mount about what the West, after over 10 years of war in Afghanistan, will be able to accomplish before NATO withdraws most of its troops at the end of 2014.

From the start, the Guantanamo transfer plan drew fire from politicians on Capitol Hill who, according to U.S. law, would have had to closely examine the proposal. The criticism came not just from leading Republicans, but also from some Democrats.

The Bergdahl family said it believes opposition may have been too intense at a time when the administration is seeking to burnish Obama's national security credentials. "It doesn't seem like dialogue is even allowed" by Congress, Bergdahl said.

Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, also has rejected the proposed transfer. "We do not negotiate with terrorists," he said in December.

An American aid worker kidnapped last year by al Qaeda in Pakistan pleaded with Obama in a video this week to save his life by meeting his captors' demands for a release of prisoners. The White House said it would not negotiate with al Qaeda.

The administration takes a different view of the Taliban. As years of military efforts have proven unable to decisively defeat the insurgent group, U.S. officials have begun to support a scenario under which it might return to power in some way.

Bergdahl, a longtime employee of global delivery company UPS, said he does not advocate an attempt to rescue his son by force. Such attempts have ended in disaster, as in the case of Linda Norgrove, an aid worker kidnapped in Afghanistan who was killed in a rescue attempt.

"That's too much risk, for too many people," Bergdahl said.

'A FATHER'S JOB'

The Pentagon is working for the missing soldier's release. "Finding Bowe Bergdahl is a top priority, and we will not stop searching for ways to return him to his family and country," said Pentagon spokesman George Little.

"We fully understand the family's concerns and they can be assured that we are doing everything possible to bring him home safely."

A U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Pentagon regularly briefs Bergdahl family on their son who they believe is in "fairly good health."

The Pentagon declined to discuss where Bergdahl may be being held, but officials believe his situation is still hazardous. "We're not talking about real nice guys out there who are willing to let Sergeant Bergdahl walk," the official said.

Bob Bergdahl, who has been tracking the war closely for years, says he intends to take matters into his own hands, studying Pashto - the language spoken in southern Afghanistan - reaching out to regional experts and contacting the media-savvy Taliban through its website.

"I feel that I have to do my job as his father," he said. "I'm working toward a diplomatic and humanitarian solution."

It is unclear what any one person could do individually, without a transfer of Taliban prisoners which plainly is a priority for the group, whose leaders are based in Pakistan.

Another U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the hope is that the Afghan peace process can be revived.

"The onus is on the Taliban," the official said. "This process could be restarted if they come back to the table."

Under the ordinal detainee transfer proposal, the government of Qatar would have had oversight of the transferred detainees' behavior and travel. The detainees, some of whom are seen as among the most menacing left at Guantanamo, would have begun a de-radicalization program.

The Bergdahls still hope for a negotiated solution.

"In the end, (the outcome in) Afghanistan will be determined by people talking to each other," Bergdahl said. "We want to make sure the detainee and hostage issue is on the table when that happens."

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