

Taliban to open office in Qatar for peace talks

Could pave path to wind down war in Afghanistan

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban announced Tuesday it will open an office in the Persian Gulf nation of Qatar to hold talks with the United States, an unprecedented step toward a peace process that might lead to a winding down of the 10-year war in Afghanistan.

Although U.S. and Taliban representatives have met secretly several times over the past year in Europe and the Persian Gulf, this is the first time the Islamist insurgent group has publicly expressed willingness for

substantive negotiations. In recent months, the idea of a Taliban political office in the Qatari capital of Doha has become a central element in U.S. efforts to draw the insurgents into such talks. The idea is to give the Taliban more legitimacy to negotiate in a location that presumably would at least partly shield them from Pakistani pressure.

Asked about the Taliban announcement, White House spokesman Jay Carney welcomed "any step ... of the Afghan-led process toward

reconciliation." He noted that "peace cannot come to Afghanistan without a political settlement."

But negotiations could falter if they do not sufficiently involve President Hamid Karzai's government, which the Taliban have dismissed as a puppet regime. Karzai's inner circle derailed last year's behind-the-scenes talks, and the Afghan leader only grudgingly agreed to the idea of the Taliban's setting up a liaison office in Qatar.

Another potential spoiler is Pakistan, which houses most of the Taliban leadership as well as the Haqqani network, which carries out major attacks in the Afghan

capital of Kabul. Pakistan believes it should have a say in any talks involving neighboring Afghanistan, which it fears will develop an alliance with its archrival, India.

Pakistan has rejected U.S. requests to mount an offensive against the Haqqani network, and relations between the two countries are at an all-time low following a cross-border incident that resulted in NATO airstrikes killing 24 Pakistani soldiers.

As the United States begins to draw down the nearly 100,000 forces it has in Afghanistan, President Barack Obama's administration wants to use its current extensive military campaign and an acknowl-

edged but incomplete plan for a long-term American presence in the country as leverage to draw the Taliban into talks with Karzai representatives.

The likelihood that the Taliban will remain a potent fighting force after most foreign forces leave by the end of 2014 is driving the U.S. and NATO to seek even an incomplete bargain with the insurgents that would keep them talking with the Kabul government.

For the U.S., one goal of such talks would be to identify cease-fire zones that could be used as a stepping stone toward a full peace agreement that stops most fighting.

The gradual process of handing over areas of the country to Afghan security control would ideally be marshaled toward encouraging peace talks, by identifying areas where a cease-fire could be tested, a senior administration official said last week.

Obama is hosting a NATO summit in his hometown of Chicago in May that will focus on Afghanistan, and his administration would like some good news to announce in an election year. U.S. officials are always careful to say that talks with the Taliban are not a reward for good behavior, but rather that they serve American interests.

Israelis, Palestinians meet, plan further peace talks

AMMAN, Jordan (AP) — The first meeting between Israeli and Palestinian peace negotiators in more than a year ended without any significant breakthroughs Tuesday, but in a small sign of progress, the sides agreed to continue the dialogue, officials said.

Resumption of any kind of contacts would be an important achievement, though Israel and the Palestinians remain far from agreement on key issues to resolve their decades-long conflict.

The 15-month breakdown in negotiations has seen a progressive souring of the atmosphere, and earlier Tuesday, the Palestinian president had warned of taking tough measures against Israel if talks don't resume by Jan. 26.

Jordan's foreign minister, Nasser Judeh, who hosted Tuesday's gathering in the Jordanian capital Amman, expressed some hope. "The important thing is the two sides have met face to face today," he said.

While acknowledging there were no

breakthroughs in "substance," he praised the positive atmosphere and said sides had agreed to hold further talks, some in secret.

"We agreed that the discussions will be continuous, that the meetings will continue and will take place here in Jordan. And we also agreed that we should not publicize about these meetings ahead of time, except through the Jordanian host, and I tell you that you may hear about it or you may not hear about it," he said.

The announcement drew praise. At the United Nations, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon encouraged the parties "to build on this meeting and to continue working to establish forward momentum toward a lasting peace."

In Washington, a White House spokesman welcomed the "positive development." He said President Barack Obama would work with leaders in the region and do "everything he can to bring them together at the table."



Egyptians wait to cast their votes outside an election center Tuesday in Qalioubiya, Egypt.

Egyptians vote in final round

Activists see ties between military, Islamist groups

CAIRO (AP) — Egyptians voted Tuesday in the final round of elections likely to seal the domination by Islamists over the country's new parliament as secular activists grew increasingly worried over the possibility of an alliance between the powerful Muslim Brotherhood and the ruling military.

Activists point to what they call mounting signs of a confluence of interests between the Brotherhood, who are set to be the biggest bloc in the next parliament, and the ruling generals. The result, they fear, will be a shelving of reforms for greater democracy that

they hoped for after the Feb. 11 fall of President Hosni Mubarak.

"Some very turbulent months are ahead of us," said prominent rights lawyer and activist Negad Borai.

"The military wants a safe return to its past life away from the limelight and with its privileges and prestige, and the Islamists want power. The two have a deal that's at everyone else's expense."

The multistage elections for the 498-seat parliament, the first to be held since Mubarak's ouster, have been the fairest and freest in living memory, a sharp contrast to

the large scale rigging and fraud that defined almost every election since army officers seized power in a 1952 coup.

The fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, the nation's largest and best organized political group, and the ultraconservative Islamic Salafis have dominated the first two rounds of the vote held since November, together gaining about 70 percent of the vote. That trend is expected to continue in the third and final round, which began Tuesday.

Their triumph has come at the expense of liberal and left-leaning parties and youth groups behind Mubarak's ouster who have since been calling for the military to immediately step down.

British royal estate site of murder mystery

LONDON (AP) — A murder mystery with elements of an Agatha Christie whodunit is unfolding at the vast country estate where Queen Elizabeth II and her family gathered to celebrate Christmas and New Year's.

British police said a young woman's body was found in the forest at Sandringham and they are treating it as a murder case.

An autopsy was conducted Tuesday, but the precise cause of death was not disclosed and investigators have yet to establish the woman's identity.

The royal family is not implicated in the crime in any way.

The body was discovered by a dog walker

on New Year's Day three miles from the queen's elegant country home. Norfolk police said tests showed the body had been there one to four months.

Police said a forensic pathologist found it was highly unlikely the death was of natural causes and there was no evidence of accidental injury. Investigators hoped to use DNA to identify the woman.

The queen and her husband, Prince Philip, celebrated the holidays at Sandringham with their children and grandchildren. The royal couple still were at Sandringham on Tuesday, along with their youngest son, Prince Edward, and his wife, Sophie.

Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Damage Assessment Trustee Council

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Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill
Draft Phase I Early Restoration Plan and Environmental Assessment
PUBLIC MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT

The Deepwater Horizon Natural Resource Trustees want to hear from you! A draft plan of proposed early restoration projects is available for public review and comment. The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Draft Phase I Early Restoration Plan and Environmental Assessment describes eight projects, two in each of these states: Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi. The projects are intended to benefit injured marshes, coastal dune and nearshore habitats, oysters, and human uses (on water recreation).

The trustees will conduct two public meetings in Florida where you can learn more about the draft restoration plan and comment on it.

FLORIDA PUBLIC MEETINGS			
Jan. 11, 2012	6:00 – 7:00 PM 7:00 – 9:00 PM	Open House Meeting	Emerald Coast Convention Center 1250 Miracle Strip Pkwy SE, Fort Walton Beach, FL 32548
Jan. 12, 2012	6:00 – 7:00 PM 7:00 – 9:00 PM	Open House Meeting	Univ. of W. FL Conference Center 11000 University Parkway, Pensacola, FL 32514

To learn more about Early Restoration, review and comment on the draft plan, visit www.gulfpillrestoration.noaa.gov or www.dep.state.fl.us/deepwaterhorizon. For more information by phone, please contact, Kristin Lock, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, 850.245.2112, or Nanciann Regalado, Dept. of the Interior, 678.296.6805.

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