

Strong Afghan Taliban Might Talk: Pakistani Analyst

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By REUTERS (quoting Mr. Rashid's story in the New York Review of Books)

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) - The Taliban have spread across Afghanistan and are inflicting sharply higher casualties but they might be persuaded to negotiate, with Pakistani help, as they reach the height of their power, a Pakistani analyst has said.

The United States is sending an extra 30,000 soldiers to Afghanistan nine years after driving the Taliban from power but U.S. commanders realize they "cannot shoot their way to victory," analyst Ahmed Rashid said in paper.

"Despite their successes, the Taliban are probably now near the height of their power," Rashid, a prominent expert on Afghanistan, said in the paper published in the latest issue of the New York Review of Books.

While a country-wide movement, the Taliban do not control population centres, nor will they, given the strength of U.S.-led NATO forces, he said.

At the same time, there was no populist insurrection against NATO forces and the majority of Afghans did not want the return of the Taliban despite anger with the U.S.-backed government of President Hamid Karzai, he said.

"Thus, the next few months could offer a critical opportunity to persuade the Taliban that this is the best time to negotiate a settlement, because they are at their strongest," Rashid said.

The Taliban, led by the reclusive Mullah Mohammad Omar, have shown the first hint of flexibility, Rashid said, beginning with a statement in November.

"The Taliban leader ... pledged that a future Taliban regime would bring peace and noninterference from outside forces, and would pose no threat to neighboring countries -- implying that al Qaeda would not be returning," he said.

The new tone could be traced to secret talks in early 2009, sponsored by Saudi Arabia at Karzai's request, he said. The talks brought no breakthrough, but led to visits to Saudi Arabia by important Taliban leaders.

U.S. British, and Saudi officials who were indirectly in contact with the Taliban there encouraged them to renounce al Qaeda and lay out negotiating demands.

"The Taliban said that distancing themselves from al Qaeda would require the other side to meet a principal demand of their own: that all foreign forces must announce a timetable to leave."

U.S. President Barack Obama said in December he planned to start bringing soldiers home in 18 months.

"GO FOR THE KILL"

Pakistan's main Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, which nurtured the Taliban through the 1990s, had been left out of the talks at the request of both the Taliban and the Afghan government, neither of whom trusted it, Rashid said.

"That now may be about to change," Rashid said. "The key to more formal negotiations with Taliban leaders lies with Pakistan and the ISI."

Pakistan is fearful of India's influence in Afghanistan and of U.S. forces withdrawing and leaving the country in

chaos, while it is also friendless in Afghanistan apart from the Taliban, even though they are wary of the ISI.

Pakistan realized the West would never tolerate it backing a Taliban takeover of Kabul, as happened in 1996, Rashid said.

"In a major policy shift, senior Pakistani military and intelligence officials say they have offered to help broker talks between Taliban leaders, the Americans and Karzai."

The ISI has power and influence over the Taliban as the Taliban resupply their fighters from Pakistan, seek medical treatment there and based most leaders' families there.

Crucial to reconciliation with the Taliban would be the agreement of Afghanistan's non-Pashtun ethnic groups, who make up just over half the population. Talks also needed a strategy to build political institutions and provide aid, he said.

"Unless such publicly announced policies are carried out, the Taliban may well conclude that it is better and safer to sit out the next 18 months, wait for the Americans to start leaving, and then, when they judge Afghanistan to be vulnerable, go for the kill in Kabul."