

US, Taliban to open Doha talks in fresh bid to end war

29/06/2019 19:19 by admin

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Zalmay Khalilzad, chief American envoy, at the United States Embassy. (Jim Huylebroek/The New York Times)

Islamabad: A fresh round of talks between the US and the Taliban is to begin in Qatar Saturday, just days after U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Washington is hoping for an Afghan peace agreement before Sept. 1.

Suhail Shaheen, a spokesman for the Taliban's political office in Doha, told The Associated Press that the Taliban's negotiating team was set to open talks with U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad. He has been in the region for several weeks meeting a legion of regional and Afghan officials, including Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

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As in previous rounds of talks between Khalilzad and the Taliban, the focus will be on the withdrawal of US troops and Taliban guarantees to prevent Afghanistan from again hosting militants who can stage global attacks. Still, both Khalilzad and Pompeo have said that agreements with the Taliban will come hand in hand with agreements on an intra-Afghan dialogue and a permanent cease-fire.

Until now the Taliban have refused to meet directly with Ghani's government but have held several rounds of talks with a collection of Afghan personalities from Kabul, including former President Hamid Karzai, several prominent opposition leaders, and government peace council members. Both those meetings were held in Moscow earlier this year. The Taliban say they will meet with government officials but as ordinary Afghans and not representatives of the government __ at least not until an agreement with the U.S. is finalized, saying the U.S. is the final arbiter on the Taliban's biggest issue of troop withdrawal.

The Taliban have also refused a cease-fire. Taliban officials who have spoken to the AP on condition they not be identified because they are not authorized to speak to the media, say they won't agree to a cease-fire until troop withdrawal is in place because returning Taliban to the battlefield with the same momentum of today if the U.S. reneges on its promises could be difficult.

After nearly 18 years and billions of dollars in the protracted war that began in 2001 to unseat the Taliban and hunt down al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and his followers who carried out the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, the Taliban control or contest roughly half of Afghan territory.

The latest round of talks comes amid heightened expectations that followed Pompeo's optimistic time frame for a pact to end Afghanistan's nearly 18-year war and America's longest-running military engagement.

- AP