



Taliban Refuses to Talk to New Afghan Government Negotiators

Afghanistan announced its negotiating team to participate in peace talks with the Taliban as part of the United States-brokered peace deal for Afghanistan. The 21-member group is led by Masoom Stanekazi, a former chief of Afghanistan's security directorate and ally of President Ashraf Ghani. It was not immediately clear whether Ghani's political rival, Abdullah Abdullah, would endorse the negotiating team as legitimate, but he said in a statement the team should not be rejected outright, and all sides in Afghanistan had a duty to seek peace. Late on Saturday evening, the Taliban surprised the Afghan government by saying it would not participate in talks with the chosen negotiating team, as it didn't satisfactorily represent all areas and interests of Afghanistan. This stance was rejected by a spokeswoman for the Afghan ministry of peace affairs, who said the negotiating team had been chosen after "wide consultations" with Afghan society.

The Taliban's refusal to negotiate with the selected team represents a blow to the deal signed between the United States and the Taliban last month in Doha, Qatar. The terms of the deal would see American troops withdraw from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban committing to peace talks with the Afghan government, among other things. This is also just the latest hold-up to the talks, with the spread of the coronavirus, Afghanistan's delicate political situation, and last-minute demands from the Taliban all slowing the process.

Afghanistan's government is currently in a state of uncertainty, with contested elections last month seeing two men, Ashraf Ghani, and Abdullah Abdullah, both declaring themselves the rightful winner and setting up a cabinet. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was unable to resolve their differences during a trip to Kabul last Monday, and the competing governments have made any negotiation with the Taliban arduous. The international community has put cautious support behind Ashraf Ghani, but has been careful not to alienate Abdullah, who has strong political support from the country's north and west. Any deal that the Ghani government pursues would need his blessing.

Prior to rejecting the Afghan negotiating team, the Taliban said they would not engage in peace talks until 5,000 prisoners were released from government custody. Ashraf Ghani said a number that large was impossible, but committed to releasing 1,500, with the first wave of 100 set to be released at the end of March over humanitarian concerns due to the spread of the coronavirus. This agreement was negotiated over Skype, as the Afghan government has restricted movement in Kabul to limit the spread of the coronavirus. President Ghani has also offered to help the Taliban combat the virus in areas the group controls should it be necessary.

Under the terms of the deal signed between the United States and the Taliban, all foreign troops are supposed to withdraw from Afghanistan by July 2021 in return for a series of security commitments from the Taliban. One of those commitments is the participation in peace talks with the Afghan government. The Taliban's rejection of the proposed negotiating team seemingly throws the agreement into jeopardy, and both sides will need to work together in the coming days and weeks to find a solution.