

TALIBAN LEADER SEEKS 'POLITICAL SETTLEMENT'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Eyes on target: Afghan militia keeping a watch at an outpost against Taliban insurgents at Charkint in Balkh Province. AFP FARSHAD USYAN

The Taliban's supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada on Sunday said he "strenuously favours" a political settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan, even as the hardline Islamist movement pursues a sweeping offensive across the nation.

The announcement came as representatives of the Afghan government and Taliban insurgents sat down for a new round of talks in Doha over the weekend, stirring hopes that the long-stalled peace talks were being resuscitated.

"In spite of the military gains and advances, the Islamic Emirate strenuously favours a political settlement in the country," Akhundzada said in a message released ahead of next week's Id-ul-Adah holiday.

"Every opportunity for the establishment of an Islamic system, peace and security that presents itself will be made use of by the Islamic Emirate," he added.

"We fully assure neighbouring, regional and world countries that Afghanistan will not permit anyone to pose a security threat to any other country using our soil."

Doha talks

For months, the two sides have been meeting on and off in the Qatari capital, but have achieved little if any notable success, with the discussions appearing to have lost momentum as the militants made enormous gains on the battlefield.

The two sides were due to talk again on Sunday.

The Taliban leader said his group remained committed to forging a solution to end the war, but slammed "the opposition parties" for "wasting time".

"Our message remains that instead of relying on foreigners, let us resolve our issues among ourselves and rescue our homeland from the prevailing crisis," he added.

The insurgents capitalised on the withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign troops from Afghanistan to launch a series of offensives across the country.

The group is now believed to control roughly half of the nation's 400 districts, several border crossings, and has laid siege to a string of vital provincial capitals.

A spokesman for the Afghan security forces said that pro-government fighters had conducted 244 operations, killing 967 "enemy" fighters — including key commanders.

"We have recaptured 24 districts so far, our goal is to retake all the territories... We are ready to defend our country," Ajmal Omar Shinwari told reporters.

Questions remain over how firm a hand the Taliban's leaders have with commanders on the ground, and whether they will be able to convince them to abide by a potential agreement if signed. The leader's statement notably made no mention of a formal ceasefire call for the Id holidays.

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