

## ***Afghanistan Taliban: Can talks succeed?***

Countries involved in the Afghan peace process say direct talks between the Kabul government and the Taliban are expected to take place in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, in the first week of March.

It would be the first such meeting of the two sides since July when Kabul-Taliban talks were held - also in Pakistan - but soon fell apart. Since then the Quadrilateral Group (Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US) has met several times - while in Afghanistan the Taliban have stepped up their offensive even through the harsh winter months.

As the Afghans and other nations have made clear, a successful outcome for these talks to lead to an eventual ceasefire and a detailed political roadmap will heavily depend on how far Pakistan is prepared to go to put pressure on the Taliban leadership to compromise. Most Taliban leaders and their families have been ensconced in Peshawar and Quetta since 2001 when they fled there after the US-led alliance drove them from power.

The risks of not pressurising the Taliban leaders are obvious and hold much danger for Pakistan too. Afghanistan is facing a multi-dimensional civil war with the Taliban now being aided by a plethora of groups such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Chechens and the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba.

On 28 January, Lt Gen John Nicholson Jr, President Barack Obama's choice to become the new commander of US forces in Afghanistan, agreed with members of the Senate Armed Services Committee who described the security situation in Afghanistan as "deteriorating". More US special forces, drones and aircraft have been deployed to southern Afghanistan, which faces the greatest Taliban threat.

However Afghan, American and Nato officials all agree that the bulk of Taliban supplies (arms, ammunition, food, clothing) is still coming from inside Pakistan, as are large numbers of recruits from the 2.5 million Afghan refugees still living in Pakistan - even though it is clear that such supplies are not being given by Islamabad. Instead, the Taliban are buying such goods locally or importing from the Gulf states and trucking them into Afghanistan via Pakistan. Pakistan has done little to curtail this traffic or

block the border passes used by Taliban transport.

### Lethal blows

Pakistan's army chief, Gen Raheel Sharif, has pledged to fight terrorism on all fronts, not to be selective towards groups the army once favoured and to foster peace in Afghanistan. He has already been successful in undermining some militant groups in the south and north of Pakistan.

Clearly the Pakistani authorities are strategically committed to ending all sources of terrorism on their soil but tactically there is still a long delay in dealing with the Afghan Taliban and the multiple extremist groups in Punjab province who are mainly targeting India.

So far the army has dealt lethal blows to the Pakistani Taliban on the border with Afghanistan and addressed the issue of militancy and criminality in Karachi. On 24 February Gen Sharif gave orders for the final push into North Waziristan to eliminate all Pakistani Taliban from what is the most difficult terrain along the common border. The army has been fighting the Pakistani Taliban in this region for nearly two years.

However, there is no such pressure on the Afghan Taliban living in Pakistan. They should now be told to either seek peace with Kabul or leave Pakistan.

At the same time many Pakistani Taliban have escaped across the border and are now living under the protection of the Afghan Taliban in eastern Afghanistan. These groups periodically cross back into Pakistan and launch vicious attacks. By letting Pakistani Taliban shelter within the ranks and territory of the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan's authorities are allowing a direct assault on the country's interests. But it is this realisation which is still missing from the military's calculus.

Unless Pakistan moves more swiftly to pressure the Afghan Taliban to hold a serious and productive peace dialogue with Kabul, the worsening military situation in Afghanistan is likely to have an impact on Pakistan as well.

### Militant offensives

The Taliban are on the verge of capturing the southern province and heroin-growing centre of Helmand. They successfully cut all electricity to

Kabul for a month by blowing up pylons in Baghlan province that brought power from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Morale is desperately low among local Afghan officials and troops.

In at least three eastern provinces bordering Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban are also fighting the so-called Islamic State group, which is trying to recruit among dissatisfied Taliban members. Not until the end of January were US special forces in Afghanistan given authorisation to go after IS fighters in the country - one reflection of how lackadaisically the Pentagon is responding to the crisis there.

From afar, it may seem good that the extremists are fighting among themselves but such fighting is claiming the lives of many civilians and also could easily spill over into Pakistan, where IS is also trying to establish its presence.

Most Pakistanis want to believe Gen Sharif that the army is serious about eliminating all forms of terrorism, while the Afghan government is equally keen to see signs that Pakistan is putting pressure on the Afghan Taliban on its soil.

The outcome of the talks in March will be critical because if they fail then we can expect a massive Taliban summer of violence in Afghanistan which will also spill over into Pakistan.