

U.S. Urges Afghanistan to Stay the Course With Peace Deal as Violence Resurges

The chief American negotiator is scrambling to keep a tentative peace deal intact as violence inflames tensions between the Taliban and the Afghan government.



By Lara Jakes

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WASHINGTON — American officials scrambled on Friday to keep Afghanistan’s tenuous peace process from falling apart, blaming the Islamic State for horrific attacks that have recently killed dozens of people and further inflamed tensions between the Taliban and the government in Kabul.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the chief U.S. negotiator for Afghan reconciliation talks, acknowledged “challenges and difficulties” in moving ahead with plans to create a power-sharing government that were outlined more than two months ago with American support.

But he urged the Taliban and Afghan officials to resist returning to violence that could threaten efforts to strike a peace deal and to withdraw American troops after more than 18 years of war.

“A political solution, a peace agreement among Afghans, is the only realistic option at the present time,” Mr. Khalilzad told reporters during a State Department briefing.

He blamed the Islamic State’s Afghan wing for stoking horrific attacks, including this week on a maternity hospital in Kabul, as the terrorist group seeks to inflame tensions.

“There are forces such as ISIS that doesn’t see peace in Afghanistan in its interests and are trying to increase violence, to undermine the prospect for peace,” Mr. Khalilzad said. “We’re urging both sides not to fall into that trap.”

Afghan officials have blamed the Taliban for both the hospital attack that killed at least 15 on Tuesday and a bombing, the same day and about 100 miles away, against a funeral procession of a police commander that killed at least 25. Taliban leaders have denied the shooting spree at the hospital, and the Islamic State has claimed responsibility for the funeral attack.

The violence, and the accusations arising from it, has pushed both the Taliban and Afghan government back into their respective corners.

President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan has vowed to resume military offensives against the Taliban, while the Taliban — who ramped up their attacks soon after signing the peace deal with the United States — have accused the Kabul government of falsely using the recent attacks as an excuse to abandon the peace agreement.

Mr. Khalilzad maintained that the Islamic State had targeted both the hospital and the funeral procession and said that he was eager to see any evidence that the Afghan government could provide that would indicate otherwise.

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He acknowledged that the Taliban had not fully ended its attacks, including a truck bombing on Thursday that killed at least five people near a military court. But Mr. Khalilzad said the group had not explicitly violated an earlier agreement to ease hostilities that was a condition of opening direct peace talks with the government.

“We are saying that they are violating the spirit if not the letter, given that commitment that all sides will try to reduce violence,” Mr. Khalilzad said.

It is not clear when talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government might begin. They were initially scheduled for March, after the Taliban signed a preliminary agreement with Washington that focused largely on withdrawing American troops in exchange for assurances that Afghanistan would not be used as a launching pad for terrorist attacks against the United States.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Since then, the Taliban and the Afghan government have sparred over the pace of releasing the other's prisoners. Mr. Khalilzad said a new date for holding the talks was under discussion, but would not say when.

The American military is still on track to draw down its forces in Afghanistan to roughly 8,600 troops, Jonathan Hoffman, a Pentagon spokesman, said Friday. That benchmark was outlined in the deal with the Taliban but was also a longtime goal for Gen. Austin S. Miller, the commander of the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan. The current American troop number in the country is just under 12,000.

The surge in violence has called the peace deal into question — and with it, American credibility in Afghanistan, said Michael Rubin, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute policy center.

“No peace process can turn a blind eye to bombings at funerals, slaughters in maternity wards, or kidnappings for ransom,” Mr. Rubin wrote in an analysis this week.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed reporting.