

Pompeo Cuts \$1 Billion in Afghan Aid as 2 Leaders Reject Push for Unity

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo failed to persuade rival Afghan leaders to support a unified government, which American diplomats consider crucial to preventing peace negotiations from falling apart.



By Mujib Mashal and Lara Jakes

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The State Department said it was cutting \$1 billion in aid to Afghanistan this year, and potentially another \$1 billion in 2021, after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo failed to persuade rival Afghan leaders in a meeting on Monday in Kabul to support a unified government, which American diplomats consider crucial to preventing peace negotiations from falling apart.

Mr. Pompeo's announcement came as he was flying back to the United States after meeting with President Ashraf Ghani and the Afghan former chief executive, Abdullah Abdullah, in an attempt to mediate between the two rivals who both claim to be the legitimate president — a crisis that threatens to split the government apart and sink hopes of ending the war.

For the top American diplomat to travel halfway around the world in the middle of the global coronavirus epidemic signaled how seriously the United States was taking the internal Afghan bickering and the risks posed for both countries. And the cutoff in aid, a major blow to the Afghan government, revealed just how frustrated the United States was with the impasse, which further imperils an already precarious peace deal.

"The United States is disappointed in them and what their conduct means for Afghanistan and our shared interests," Mr. Pompeo said in a statement. "Their failure has harmed U.S.-Afghan relations and, sadly, dishonors those Afghan, Americans and coalition partners who have sacrificed their lives and treasure in the struggle to build a new future for this country."

"This leadership failure poses a direct threat to U.S. national interests," Mr. Pompeo said.

Speaking to reporters aboard his plane, Mr. Pompeo would not say from where the \$1 billion would be cut but made clear that American support for Afghan security forces would continue. "We are going to continue to do everything we need to do to support those Afghan security forces," he said. "It is central."

The money could be restored, Mr. Pompeo said, if "Afghan leaders choose to form an inclusive government that can provide security and participate in the peace process."

He also said the United States will send \$15 million to the country to help stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Mr. Ghani was declared the winner of a bitterly disputed election last month and was inaugurated on March 9. His opponent, Mr. Abdullah, also declared himself winner and held his own inauguration next door, on the same day.

Days of American efforts, into the early hours of inauguration day, failed to prevent the announcement of two presidents and keep the country's elite united around the peace process.

During his eight hours in Kabul, Mr. Pompeo met with both Afghan leaders, separately and then together, in an attempt to find a way to get them to work together.

But Mr. Pompeo was unable to persuade them, and left the capital with the political crisis unresolved.

On his way back to Washington on Monday night, Mr. Pompeo stopped in Doha, Qatar, to meet with Taliban officials who have been negotiating with American envoys on a peace process.

Mr. Pompeo seemed to indicate that the Taliban had been a better partner in the peace process than the government in Kabul.

"They committed to reducing violence and they've largely done that," Mr. Pompeo said when asked if the Taliban had lived up to its pledges in the peace agreements. "And they are working towards delivering their team to the ultimate negotiations."

The secretary of state's visit came a day after Afghan government officials met with Taliban delegates to discuss details of a prisoner release that is a part of the deal. Balancing coronavirus concerns with fears that a painstakingly negotiated peace deal could fall apart, the two sides met by videoconference on Sunday — a notable approach, given the Taliban's origins as a national

government that largely banned television and music.

Though the meeting between the Taliban and government officials was not the formal start of direct talks between the two sides — that step is predicated on reaching agreement on the prisoner exchange — the technical discussion was the first negotiating meeting between them since the United States and the insurgents signed a deal last month.

The prisoner exchange, involving up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan government prisoners, as called for in the deal the Americans signed, has been an extreme point of contention. The prisoners were supposed to have been released before the beginning of Afghan negotiations on March 10.

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Mr. Ghani's government has vehemently disagreed with the terms the United States agreed to with the Taliban, delaying the future steps of the peace deal. The United States' special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, has been in Kabul for several weeks trying to find a solution to the prisoner release and calm the political crisis

After much shuttle diplomacy, Mr. Ghani agreed only to a phased release of the prisoners in small batches and conditioned it on the Taliban halting their attacks — something the insurgents have said goes against what they have signed with the United States.

In his statement Monday, Mr. Pompeo criticized the Afghan government for refusing to “take practical steps” to release prisoners as a confidence-building step for peace negotiations. But most of his criticism was leveled at Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah for failing to unite and appoint a team of negotiators that would represent all sides of the Afghan government.



Imprisoned members of the Taliban in the Pul-e-Charkhi jail in Kabul in December. Rahmat Gul/Associated Press

In the Sunday videoconference between the Taliban and the government, an American team led by Mr. Khalilzad and a team of Qatari diplomats facilitated the discussions.

“Today, the US and Qatar facilitated the first Afghan government to Taliban technical talks on prisoner releases, via Skype video conferencing,” Mr. Khalilzad wrote in a series of Twitter posts late on Sunday. “Everyone clearly understands the coronavirus threat makes prisoner releases that much more urgent.”

Suhail Shaheen, a spokesman for the Taliban's negotiating team, said the talks had “solely focused on prisoner release, and there were initial agreements on some issues regarding the release of prisoners.”

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.

Mr. Shaheen said the sides would hold another videoconference on Tuesday.

Hamdullah Mohib, Afghanistan's national security adviser, suggested that the call had covered other issues to make the prisoner release possible.

"All sides emphasized the importance of a reduction in violence, direct negotiations, and a permanent and comprehensive cease-fire," Mr. Mohib said in a statement on Twitter.

In the days before signing the deal with the United States, the Taliban observed a partial cease-fire with the Afghan government. But that deal included no agreement on a lasting violence reduction that was envisioned as part of the ensuing talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.



Gen. Austin S. Miller, the head of United States forces in Afghanistan, right, and Washington's peace envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, center, at Mr. Ghani's inauguration this month. Rahmat Gul/Associated Press

In recent weeks, the Taliban have made clear that they see violence as a major part of their leverage in talks, and have intensified their operations across Afghanistan. The Afghan government forces have largely remained in a defensive mode and are beginning to suffer heavy casualties.

In one of the most brutal Taliban attacks since the group signed the deal with the United States, insurgents stormed an outpost in southern Zabul Province and killed at least 24 members of the Afghan security forces on Thursday, torching their outposts and burning the bodies to a point that many were unrecognizable.

The Taliban have also ramped up attacks in the north. In response to an overnight Taliban attack in Kunduz Province that had begun late on Saturday in Imam Saheb district, Afghan forces called for an airstrike on Sunday that resulted in the deaths of at least nine civilians — including four women and two children — according to Gul Bai, a local police commander.

Mujib Mashal reported from Kabul, Afghanistan, and Lara Jakes from Washington. Najim Rahim contributed reporting from Kunduz, Afghanistan.