

PAKISTAN UPDATE: 18,000 FLEE KHYBER AREA, HAQQANI INSIST TALIBAN MUST LEAD TALKS



Aerial view of the Torkham crossing from Pakistan's Khyber Agency into Afghanistan. (ISAFMedia photo.)

Last week's visit by a delegation of high-ranking US officials to Pakistan featured the ironic use of the US Secretary of State to deliver a newly militarized message to the Pakistanis regarding the way forward, with the introduction of the "fight, talk, build" catchphrase. Although the US clearly urged Pakistan to attack the Haqqani network in its safe haven in North Waziristan, it appears that Pakistan is taking part of the message to heart and is attacking militants, but the attacks are in the Khyber Agency, two agencies away from North Waziristan. At the same time, we learn that the Haqqanis are now insisting that if they take part in talks with the US, the talks must include the Taliban in a leading role.

Pakistan's Dawn informs us through an AFP story that Pakistan's army has ordered over 18,000 civilians to evacuate portions of the Kyber Agency because of military action there:

At least 18,000 people have fled their

homes in Pakistan's tribal district of Khyber, fearing a fresh onslaught of fighting between the army and Islamist militants, officials said Tuesday.

Families streamed out of the district, a flashpoint for Taliban and other violent groups on the Nato supply line into neighbouring Afghanistan, after the army ordered them to leave because of military action going on in the area.

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"Around 3,200 families, up to 18,000 people, have arrived in the Jalozai refugee camp and we are making arrangements to facilitate them," Adnan Khan, spokesman for the disaster management authority of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, told AFP.

It will be interesting to see if the US accepts this action by Pakistan as a good faith effort to respond to last week's demands. Cutting down on the frequency of attacks on US convoys into Afghanistan might help to soften the US reaction to Pakistan's refusal to carry out attacks on the Haqqanis in North Waziristan. The Torkham Crossing is the most heavily used supply route into Afghanistan and it sees a steady stream of tankers delivering fuel. These tankers often are subject to attack in Pakistan, so if the current action in Kyber reduces those attacks, the US should see this as a positive development.

Meanwhile, the Haqqani network tells Reuters that they will not take part in direct talks with the US unless the Taliban play a lead role:

The Afghan Haqqani insurgent network will not take part individually in any peace talks with the United States and negotiations must be led by the Taliban leadership, a senior commander told Reuters on Tuesday.

"They (the Americans) would not be able to find a possible solution to the Afghan conflict until and unless they hold talks with the Taliban shura," said the Haqqani group commander, referring to the Taliban leadership council.

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"This is not the first time the U.S. has approached us for peace talks. The Americans had made several such attempts for talks which we rejected as we are an integral part of the Taliban led by Mullah Mohammad Omar," he said.

The fact that the Haqqanis now are laying out the conditions for taking part in talks would appear to be progress toward talks eventually taking place. The question now becomes how much the US will insist on its "fight" part of "fight, talk, build" preceding the actual talks.