

PEACE TALKS BREAKING OUT ALL OVER

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal (behind a paywall, so no link!) Afghan President Hamid Karzai has said that Afghanistan has joined the “secret” talks that have been underway for some time now between the US and the Taliban. From Reuters:

Karzai’s government had previously been excluded from early, exploratory contacts between the Taliban and the United States, with the insurgents seen as resisting the involvement of a local administration they regard as a puppet of Washington.

But the Journal quoted Karzai on Thursday as saying the Taliban were “definitively” interested in a peace settlement to end the 10-year war in Afghanistan, and that all three sides were now involved in discussions.

“People in Afghanistan want peace, including the Taliban. They’re also people like we all are. They have families, they have relatives, they have children, they are suffering a tough time,” the Journal quoted Karzai as saying in an interview conducted on Wednesday in the Afghan capital.

“There have been contacts between the U.S. government and the Taliban, there have been contacts between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and there have been some contacts that we have made, all of us together, including the Taliban.”

Karzai also arrived in Islamabad today and entered immediately into discussions with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari. From the Express Tribune:

Earlier in the day, President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani welcomed Afghan President Hamid Karzai at the President House.

In a meeting at the Prime Minister House, Gilani and Karzai discussed a range of issues, including the regional situation and bilateral ties, which have been hit by mistrust following recent cross-border attacks. The two leaders also discussed ongoing efforts for restoring peace in conflict-hit Afghanistan, such as US' negotiations with the Taliban in which both Pakistan and Afghanistan have felt neglected by the US.

But those were the second and third paragraphs of the Express Tribune article. The first paragraph has material that is not nearly as prevalent in the US reporting on the talks among the US, the Taliban, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It turns out that Karzai has traveled to Islamabad to take part in three way meetings with Pakistan and Iran. The first paragraph:

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has arrived in Pakistan for a two-day visit to attend the Pakistan-Iran-Afghanistan trilateral summit in Islamabad, *Express News* reported on Thursday.

So, following on yesterday's news that Iran has taken the next formal steps toward re-starting the Group 5+1 talks on nuclear technology, we have Ahmadinejad going to Islamabad for regional peace talks. Fars News has more on the visit:

The two-day Islamabad summit will open on Friday with the participation of the Iranian president and his Afghan and Pakistani counterparts Hamid Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari.

"We hope that the Islamabad meeting

would take bigger steps toward the promotion of regional cooperation and the restoration of peace and stability in the region," President Ahmadinejad told reporters before departure on Thursday.

Ahmadinejad couldn't resist pointing out that efforts from the US haven't exactly helped the situation so far:

He said that all solutions put forward by extra-regional countries failed to contribute to the restoration of stability in the region.

Returning to the issue of Karzai joining the peace talks on behalf of Afghanistan, there are interesting observations about both Karzai and the Taliban taking part and what this means. From the New York Times coverage of Karzai's arrival in Islamabad:

Nonetheless, the mere possibility that the Taliban would even entertain talks with the Afghan government is significant. In the past, the Taliban have described Mr. Karzai as a "puppet leader" and the Afghan government as a "puppet government." Since the Taliban were ousted in 2001, they have declared they are the rightful Afghan government. In the last year, they have insisted on face-to-face talks with the Americans rather than with the Afghan government.

Continued direct talks with the Afghan government would suggest an admission that the Afghan government is legitimate. The talks would also be important because they would begin to get key players needed to start substantive discussions in the same room, but the obstacles to real progress remain formidable.

But there are serious concerns by some parties inside Afghanistan that Karzai could go too far in making concessions to the Taliban. From Reuters:

Afghanistan's government must not retreat from hard-won freedoms or return to strict religious curbs to reach a peace deal with the Taliban, the country's former spy chief said, warning Afghans were distrustful of the secrecy surrounding nascent talks.

After President Hamid Karzai said the U.S. and Afghan governments had opened three-way "contacts" with the Taliban in a bid to end the country's decade-long war, Amrullah Saleh said ethnic groups coalescing towards a more unified opposition were prepared to fight to prevent a return of Taliban militancy.

"We want the state to remain pluralistic, not bow to the barrel of a gun," Saleh, a former head of Afghanistan's intelligence service and now a political opposition activist, told Reuters at his heavily-guarded Kabul home.

"If the Taliban, like us, want to come and play according to the script, sure. But if they come with gun-mounted Hi-Lux trucks, no, that means continuation of civil war, of war, and fragmentation of Afghanistan," he said.

There clearly are many facets to negotiating a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan and the surrounding region. It is heartening that so many parties are taking part in discussions now. If all parties negotiate in good faith and truly desire peace, there might just be a chance to achieve it. However, because the region is splintered into so many different interest groups, there will always be concern that a group could come to the conclusion that it has

more to gain from violence than from taking part in any settlement. Let us hope that somehow a pathway will be found that leads to all sides moving away from violence.