

PEACE TALKS PROVE FATAL FOR YET ANOTHER PARTICIPANT

Earlier this week, I noted that a ranking member of Afghanistan's Taliban, Abdul Raqib, was gunned down in Peshawar, Pakistan. It turns out that Raqib wasn't just any Taliban leader, though. He had in fact just returned from Dubai, where he had been participating in peace talks with the Afghan government.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai spoke out against the killing. From ToloNews:

President Hamid Karzai Tuesday condemned the assassination of Taliban commander Mullah Abdul Raqib, calling him a victim of peace. He went on to invite Raqib's group Tehreek-Islami Taliban to return to Afghanistan.

Mullah Abdul Raqib was gunned down in the Pakistani city of Peshawar by unidentified attackers on Monday. On Tuesday, a military helicopter transferred his body to his native town in northern Takhar province.

This is not the first time a Taliban leader has been targeted in Pakistan. The U.S. has waged an intensive drone war on Taliban commanders throughout Pakistan in recent years. Karzai has been highly critical of the attacks on Taliban leaders, claiming the U.S.' aggression has pushed Taliban leaders away from negotiations.

"We saw several green lights from those willing to start the peace negotiation process, but most of them were assassinated," Karzai's deputy spokesman Fayeq Wahidi said. "The killing of Mullah Raqib is part of the coordinated murders."

Although the ToloNews article doesn't come out and say it explicitly, a report by BakhtarNews does say that Raqib had been to Dubai for the peace talks and had just returned when he was killed:

President Hamid Karzai condemned the killing of Maulawi Abdul Raqib Takhari member of Tehrek Taliban and called him an open e[sic] victim of the path of peace. Maulawi Abdul Raqib former minister of refugee affairs of Taliban government who has been supporter of peace and understanding in Afghanistan, after participating at the recent peace talks in Dubai led by Mullah Agha Jan Mutasim returned to Peshawar and he was killed there on Monday.

Returning to the ToloNews article, we see that while Karzai had blamed "US aggression", the attendees of the funeral blamed Pakistan's ISI for the killing:

Participants in the burial ceremony accused the Pakistani intelligence service (ISI) of being behind the assassination.

"People shared their sorrows in the burial ceremony. He was working for peace. People chanted slogans against those killing him; they blamed ISI for the killing," Takhar Governor Abdul Latif Ibrahimi said.

The Taliban is not a monolithic entity, and Mutasim Agha Jan's moderate faction is often opposed by more militant members of the group. As might be expected, they are speaking out once again to say that Jan does not speak for them and that they do not condone the peace talks:

The Taliban militants group in Afghanistan denied reports regarding peace talks between the Afghan government officials and Taliban group

leaders in United Arab Emirates.

Zabiullah Mujahid, spokesman for the Taliban group, following a statement, said Mullah Agha Jan Mutasim does not represent the Taliban group and has no links with the movement.

Mujahid his statement further added that no member of the Taliban group has attended any talks with the Afghan government officials in Dubai.

Clearly, the talks between Karzai's government and Agha Jan's group are opposed by the US (as seen here), the ISI (as seen in the funeral comments above) and by more militant factions of the Afghan Taliban itself.

Keep in mind, though, that the US has tentatively reached out to another faction of Taliban figures active in Afghanistan. We saw earlier this week that the US is seeking a prisoner exchange that could free Bowe Bergdahl. In this case, it appears that the Haqqani network is now holding Bergdahl, and so they are the target of the talks. An article in today's Dawn accounts for what appears to be a new-found urgency on the part of the US to find Bergdahl:

Highly credible sources told DawnNews that during meetings with Pakistan's top defence and military officials, General Lloyd J Austin, chief of the United States Central Command, sought Pakistan's help in tracing the kidnapped US soldier before any possible military operation was launched in North Waziristan.

If Pakistan does indeed launch military action in North Waziristan, it appears that the US fears that Bergdahl could be in danger. Pakistan has long been accused by the US of harboring and even assisting the Haqqani network, so it is quite interesting that this potential military

action has raised concerns. It isn't clear whether these concerns relate to Bergdahl simply being in an area of military action or if the US thinks that Pakistan will actually attack suspected Haqqani network hideouts.

The question now becomes why any member of the Haqqani network would show up for negotiations with the US, given the recent death rates for negotiators.