

# WIDELY VARYING REPORTS ON FIRST TALKS BETWEEN PAKISTAN GOVERNMENT, TTP

The first round of formal talks involving figures from Pakistan's government and military on one side and the Pakistan Taliban, or TTP, on the other concluded Wednesday. Because the talks were held in the tribal areas, reports on how the talks went have been slow to filter out. Further, even within single media outlets in Pakistan, the reports vary widely. Consider this report from Dawn:

The first round of direct peace talks between the government and the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leadership concluded on Wednesday, with both the sides reportedly reaching an agreement on several issues, DawnNews reported.

Information Minister Pervaiz Rashid, however, did not share any details of the landmark talks, saying only that once the negotiators returned, it would be up to the government to make statements to media.

The negotiations are part of a push by the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban that would end a bloody insurgency that has killed thousands of people in recent years.

Sources told DawnNews that the both parties sought guarantees from each other, during the talks, which were held at Biland Khel area of Shawa Tehsil on the border of Orakzai and North Waziristan tribal agencies bordering Afghanistan.

The TTP also responded positively to the demands of indefinite ceasefire and the release of non-combatant prisoners put forward by the government's committee, they added.

But Dawn also is carrying this story, which was put on their website a little more than a day after the one above:

Despite a degree of optimism and feel-good impression generated by the militant-handpicked committee, insiders believe the first direct face-to-face interaction with militants has hit a stalemate and unless some quick decisions are taken, it will be difficult to prolong the ceasefire. The ceasefire is to expire on Monday.

According to an insider, the militants have set two conditions for continuation of the peace talks. One, the creation of a demilitarised peace zone in mountainous Shaktoi, South Waziristan, to allow freedom of movement and two, the release of non-combatants.

The insider said the five-member militants' committee sought written guarantees before they could commit to an extension in the month-long ceasefire. "For nearly seven hours, we talked to them about the destruction wrought by over a decade of violence, the loss of lives and property and displacement of people.

"We said 'let bygones be bygones, let's bury the hatchet and make a new beginning'," the insider said.

"Nothing seemed to appeal to them. I have come back really disappointed. The chances of success and continuation are not terribly bright. This is a non-starter," he said.

The Express Tribune, meanwhile, seems to have a more positive take on what transpired:

Government negotiators and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) agreed to continue talks after the first face-to-face meeting between the two sides held in a remote tribal area on Wednesday.

However, according to sources, the fate of the month-long ceasefire as well as nascent peace process hinges on the release of 'non-combatant' Taliban prisoners allegedly in the custody of security agencies.

Chief Taliban intermediary Maulana Samiul Haq, who also attended the unprecedented meeting, described it as 'positive' which 'helped reduce the trust-deficit' between the government and the TTP.

"It's a huge milestone [in the peace process]. For the first time, government representatives and the Taliban sat across the table to talk peace," he told a news conference in Peshawar after returning from North Waziristan. He was flanked by his colleagues Prof Ibrahim and Maulana Yousaf Shah.

For some perspective on just how important this groundbreaking meeting was, here is part of an editorial from the Express Tribune:

After much back and forth, the government committee finally met face to face with members of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – and this is a significant development despite no overtly concrete announcement being made after the meeting.

Firstly, that the meeting actually took place means a major hurdle in the way of peace process has been addressed – that of trust deficit. One is reluctant to

say that this hurdle has been completely overcome, because it was the government that went the extra mile by travelling to a place that would essentially have been of the TTP's choosing – given that the government committee members are said to have travelled to the spot in vehicles provided by the TTP. By doing this, the government put its negotiators at risk and now the TTP will have to show similar trust in the government because building trust is effectively a quid-pro-quo process. Secondly, the importance of the reported inclusion of an official of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) cannot be stressed enough. There were plenty of murmurs behind the scenes that the military and the intelligence services were not on board when the peace process was initiated by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. This not only raised questions over the negotiation process – both in the public and by the TTP themselves – but also gave rise to talk of a rift between Rawalpindi and Islamabad. That a colonel-level ISI officer was present at the meeting is a welcome gesture by the military and will bolster the process.

It would have been impossible to imagine only a few months ago that the ISI would send an official representative to a peace negotiating session.

Insisting on the release of the “noncombatants” they have identified seems to me to be a good negotiating tactic by the TTP. They had presented such a list to the government nearly two weeks ago, claiming that 300 women and children from the tribal areas are being held by the government. It appears that they have since updated the list. According to the pessimistic Dawn article, the description of those on the list now also includes the elderly. Also, that report states that the government has denied

that they have any noncombatants in detention. But there remains the possibility that some on the list (and perhaps some combatants) could be released as a goodwill gesture:

What could salvage the situation, the insider was asked. "The government will have to release some non-combatants as a confidence-building measure. It may consider 'quietly releasing a few others too'."

The TTP position with regard to the noncombatants it is holding, though, relies on a stupidly disingenuous argument:

Asked if the militants showed any willingness to release Prof Ajmal Khan, the aged Vice Chancellor of Peshawar University, Shahbaz Taseer, son of the late governor of Punjab, and Ali Haider Gilani, son of the former prime minister, the insider said: "We brought up the matter of their release and asked if they would be willing to release them.

"We said they were also non-combatants and must be released as part of confidence-building measures. Their response was straight.

They could swap Ajmal Khan for three of their fighters arrested in connection with his abduction – a proposition the TTP had made a year ago.

Furthermore, they said, those in captivity belonged to political parties the militants are at war with and therefore, they were not non-combatants."

It's hard to see how the government couldn't apply the same flimsy description to the noncombatants it holds (heck, maybe they can even borrow some language from US "material

support" legislation), so the TTP is putting itself in a weak negotiating position on this point.

Let's hope that the ceasefire will indeed be extended and that the next round of talks produces more tangible progress.