



## In Focus

## Afghans Back Pak Talks With Taliban

Afghanistan backs Islamabad's plan to hold talks with the Pakistani Taliban, the government said on Saturday, but urged its neighbor not to allow the militants space to regroup and launch raids across the border, Reuters reported.

The new Pakistani government says it wants to open talks with the Taliban. "Afghanistan supports any measure that leads to the restoration of security and stability, provided such a step does not cause the expansion of further terrorism into Afghanistan," the government said in a statement about the talks.

"We sincerely ask the Islamic Republic of Pakistan not to allow the terrorists to endanger the lives and security of Afghans by using its soil."

## &gt; Halt the Terrorists

Meanwhile, Afghan Defense Ministry said Pakistan should stop "terrorists" from using its soil to attack Afghanistan if it makes deals with Taliban militants along the troubled border.

Islamabad has been trying to reach a peace deal with a Taliban commander on its side of the frontier. The militant halted talks last week because the government refused to withdraw its troops from his area, AFP reported.

The Afghan Defense Ministry said it was concerned any such deal would not result in a cessation of violence in Afghanistan by militants said to be based in Pakistan and to cross the border to attack.

The ministry cited media reports that a spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban vowed to continue the "real jihad (holy war)" in Afghanistan even if a peace deal was reached with Islamabad.

"Afghanistan supports any action resulting in peace and stability in the region but only if such actions do not cause further terrorist activities in Afghanistan," it said.

The ministry described a now-defunct 2006 deal between Pakistan and pro-Taliban militants in its Waziristan area as a "bitter experience".

## &gt; Taliban Rebuilding

It had allowed militants "sufficient time to regroup, re-equip and mobilize themselves and take the lives of hundreds of children, women and men," it said, referring to a wave of extremist violence in both countries.

"Afghanistan's biggest hope for the brotherly and friendly country of Pakistan is that its land be not used by terrorists against Afghanistan," it added.

The Taliban were removed from government in Afghanistan in a US-led invasion in late 2001 for harboring Al-Qaeda, which it allowed to operate training camps.

Many rebels fled across the border to Pakistan from where they are said to be plotting an Al-Qaeda-backed insurgency that has left thousands of people dead in Afghanistan, including civilians and international troops supporting Kabul.

The US State Department said last week that Al-Qaeda is rebuilding itself in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas and North West Frontier Province, both on the border with Afghanistan.

Kabul favors peace talks with rebels to halt the unrest, but only with those who agree to accept the new government and renounce violence.

## Qatar to Salvage Yemen Ceasefire



Qatari mediators returned to Yemen's volatile northern province of Saada on Sunday, hoping to salvage a truce brought to the verge of collapse by a mosque bombing and days of clashes between rebels and the army.

Rebels led by Abdul-Malik Al-Houthi seized a government building in the town of Manbah after clashes on Saturday and the army has now surrounded the compound, local tribal sources said. Tribes were mediating an end to the standoff.

"The Qataris and the government delegation have now returned to Saada amid continued tensions," the chief rebel negotiator Saleh Habra told Reuters.

The situation in Saada remained tense after a bomb planted in a motorcycle killed 15 people outside a mosque on Friday, with government forces setting up checkpoints around the city and few people on the streets, he said.

Yemen has witnessed attacks by different groups targeting everything from tourists to government offices in recent years, but attacks on mosques were virtually unheard of until Friday.

## Kuwaitis Debate Democracy

Frustrated by political rows that have stalled development in one of the world's wealthiest states, Kuwaitis are locked in a heated debate over why their brand of democracy is not working as they prepare to go to the polls on May 17, AFP said.

"A half democracy does not work," said political analyst Ayed Al-Manna, referring to Kuwait's system under which it has a legislative assembly but no majority government and no political parties.

Others believe that repeated standoffs between parliament and the government reflect purported power struggles within the Al-Sabah dynasty, which has ruled Kuwait for 250 years and holds key government posts such as defense, interior and foreign affairs.

The fourth largest OPEC producer has been rocked by a string of political crises in the past few years, most recently in March when Emir

Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah dissolved parliament and called early polls following a row between MPs and the government.

"It is difficult to imagine how a government in a parliamentary system can survive without a majority," Manna told AFP.

Although elected MPs enjoy extensive legislative and monitoring powers, the 50-seat house has no say in the formation of the cabinet, which by tradition is headed by a senior member of the Al-Sabah family.

A new government is also not required to obtain a vote of confidence from parliament.

Lawmakers can grill individual ministers and vote them out of office but have no power to bring down the entire cabinet.

"Incomplete democracy in Kuwait has really hurt the country and stalled development projects," insisted independent candidate Nami Al-Nami.

Parliament has been dissolved three times since 1999—twice in the past two years—after clashing with the government.



Since February 2006, Kuwait has witnessed the resignation of four cabinets, several ministers have been questioned and forced to quit, and a number of key reform bills and economic projects have been bogged down in parliament.

A small country with a native population of just over one million, Kuwait sits on about 10 percent of global crude reserves.

It has amassed \$250 billion of assets in the past nine years due to high oil prices.

Fayyad: Peace Process Meaningless  
Rice Back in Israel

Despite international calls on Israel to stop expanding Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian lands, the regime is continuing to build more settlements.

Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said Israel has failed to meet any obligation with regards to peace, especially ending settlement expansion in West Bank, Xinhua reported Saturday.

Fayyad told the Ramallah-based Al-Ayyam daily after an international donor's meeting Friday in London to provide aid to the cash-strapped Palestinian National Authority (PNA).

Fayyad warned that continuation of the settlement activities, inside what the Palestinians hope to be their future state, "will make the peace process meaningless".

"If the world was unable to stop the settlement expansions which Israel promised to halt, how will we have the confidence in a vital aid towards reaching a solution in 2008?" Fayyad said.

According to Fayyad, three priorities for Palestinians are the freezing of all settlement activities, essential change in Israel's security behavior and securing the freedom

of movement and crossing.

## &gt; Suleiman Expected in Israel

Hamas movement on Saturday expected that Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman will arrive in Israel on Monday to present Egypt's ceasefire offer which Palestinian armed groups accepted.

"Most probably, Mr. Suleiman will arrive on Monday to hand the lull deal after Palestinians unanimously agreed on during last week talks in Cairo, Xinhua quoted Ayman Taha, a spokesman for Hamas as saying.

According to the Egyptian vision, the ceasefire will take place in the Gaza Strip, before being expanded in the West Bank.

## &gt; Rice Meets Barak

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Sunday met Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak to discuss removing West Bank roadblocks as she began a day of meetings that aim apparently to speed up Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

"Let's get to work," Rice said as she sat down with Barak, who heads the Israeli defense ministry and exerts great influence over the network of checkpoints and roadblocks that Israel argues it needs to prevent suicide bombings, Reuters reported.

Palestinians view the barriers as collective punishment and Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad say they blight the Palestinian economy.

In other news, Jordanian King Abdullah II believes that progress in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians would bring a warmer relationship between Israel and the Arab nations, said Israeli lawmaker Yossi Beilin on Saturday.

Beilin, who met with Abdullah II in Jordan's coastal town of Aqaba Friday night, told Israel Radio that the king said advancement of the political process with the Palestinians, even prior to resolving most of the core issues, would result in the implementation of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.