

Taliban warn peace deal with US near breaking point

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US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, left, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban group's top political leader sign a peace agreement between Taliban and U.S. officials in Doha, Qatar, Saturday, Feb. 29, 2020. (AP Photo/Hussein Sayed)

Islamabad: The Taliban in a statement Sunday said their peace deal with the United States was nearing a breaking point, accusing Washington of violations that included drone attacks on civilians, while also chastising the Afghan government for delaying the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners promised in the agreement.

The Taliban said they had restricted attacks against Afghan security forces to rural outposts, had not attacked international forces and had not attacked Afghan forces in cities or military installations. The Taliban said these limits on their attacks had not been specifically laid out in the agreement with the U.S. signed in February.

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The militants said they had reduced their attacks compared to last year, but said continued violations would create an atmosphere of mistrust that will not only damage the agreements, but also force mujaheddin to a similar response and will increase the level of fighting.

The Taliban have accused the Afghan government of using indefensible arguments to explain the repeated delays in releasing a promised 5,000 Taliban prisoners in exchange for 1,000 government personnel. The Afghan government's foot-dragging has also left Washington frustrated.

Meanwhile, in the Afghan capital, President Ashraf Ghani announced his new Cabinet even as he squabbles with his main political challenger over last year's election results. Ghani's move came even as Afghan mediators including former President Hamid Karzai shuttled between the president and his opponent, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, who has also declared himself Afghanistan's president.

The country's Independent Election Commission has declared Ghani a winner, but Abdullah and the Elections Complaint Commission have charged widespread irregularities.

Attempts to negotiate an end to the political turmoil roiling Kabul have made little progress, frustrating the U.S. and potentially derailing the next stage in the Afghan peace process. Washington has threatened to withhold USD 1 billion in aid this year if Ghani and Abdullah can't reach a compromise.

The Trump administration wants a quick start to intra-Afghan negotiations, the next step in the peace deal it signed on Feb. 29. It looked promising when Ghani announced his negotiating team last week, but Abdullah's response to it has been lukewarm and the Taliban have rejected it as one-sided.

The U.S. and NATO have already begun to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. The full withdrawal is expected to be completed in 14 months and is tied to Taliban commitments to fight terrorist groups and help in the battle against the Islamic State group.

- AP