

'Taliban leader Omar sent letter to Barack Obama'

Washington, February 04: The White House received a letter last year purported to come directly from Mullah Omar, the reclusive leader of the Taliban, asking the United States to deliver militant prisoners whose transfer is now at the heart of the Obama administration's bid to broker peace in Afghanistan.

The unusual message kicked off a debate within the administration about whether it was truly authored by the mysterious one-eyed preacher believed to be directing the Taliban from hiding in Pakistan -- and its meaning for US efforts to forge a negotiated end to America's longest war.

"As we have engaged various interlocutors as part of the reconciliation process, we have received a variety of messages that were represented as being from senior members of the Taliban," an administration official said on condition of anonymity.

"However, we haven't received a letter that we are certain is from Mullah Omar."

The message, conveyed through an intermediary and intended for President Barack Obama, reportedly expressed impatience that the White House had not yet transferred five former senior Taliban officials out of Guantanamo Bay military prison.

US officials have been considering moving the detainees to Afghan custody in the Gulf state of Qatar as one of a series of good-faith measures that, if successful, could lead to talks on Afghanistan's future between militants and the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

The accelerating efforts to set such talks in motion are a central part of the Obama administration's strategy for leaving behind a modicum of stability as it winds down the US combat mission in Afghanistan.

A former imam and mujahideen guerrilla, Omar has not participated in initial US contacts with insurgent representatives, which have been focused on confidence-building measures. But his public support would be crucial for any peace agreement if substantive negotiations can be had.

After over 10 years of war, Washington and its Western allies are announcing plans to steadily withdraw their troops amid doubts whether the chronically weak, corrupt Afghan government can confront ongoing violence.

The administration official said the White House was "sceptical" the letter was actually from Mullah Omar. But others within the administration believed it was authentic.

"There's no signature. However, it expresses views consistent with what Taliban interlocutors have told us all along," the official said.

Taliban intentions unclear

While the impact of the purported missive last summer is unclear, a sign that the Taliban's political and spiritual leader was eager to get the peace process going - or at least engage in steps the United States hopes will lead to real talks - would be an encouraging sign for the high-stakes initiative.

It might also go some way to dispelling doubts dogging the State Department-led efforts about whether the people US diplomats have held initial meetings with over the past year do in fact speak for the leadership of the shadowy militant group, believed to be based in Pakistan.

While some statements attributed to the Taliban indicate a willingness to take part in peace talks, others suggest the opposite, or indicate the group will not accept US conditions for a deal, including allegiance to the Afghan constitution.

While the Taliban regularly issues statements, communication from Mullah Omar himself, who has not been seen in public for years, is more rare. The cleric, an ethnic Pashtun, is believed to have been born into a poor Afghan family around 1960.

After losing his right eye fighting Soviet occupiers, he became a leader of the ultra-conservative Taliban movement and was named 'Commander of the Faithful' by a group of Islamic scholars made up of Taliban in 1996.

His Taliban government was known for oppression of women and ferocity against those seen as violating its strict interpretation of Islam until it was toppled in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks.

Today, Mullah Omar is not only seen as leader of the 'Quetta Shura' Taliban, named for the Pakistani city of Quetta where many Taliban leaders are believed to have resided for years, but is revered by other factions of the militant group, such as the Haqqani network that is active in eastern Afghanistan.

In the past, Omar rejected peace talks, saying they were a bid to "throw dust in the eyes" of Afghans, while the Taliban has denounced Karzai's government as illegitimate.

Last November, however, a statement attributed to the cleric on the occasion of a Muslim holiday indicated an openness to accept Afghans willing to renounce their support for the West, even as he praised the continuing 'jihad' against a foreign enemy.

The Taliban then made a surprise announcement last month it would open a political office in Qatar, suggesting the group may be willing to engage in negotiations that would likely give it government positions or official control over much of its historical southern heartland.

But it remains unclear whether the group is truly interested in entertaining authentic political negotiations - or simply wants to recover its prisoners.

Even though US officials say no decision has been made to go ahead with the detainee transfer, some members of Congress are already objecting, warning that transferred detainees could rejoin the fight or that the Taliban could revert to past tactics.

While Congress does not have the power to block the move, the White House might rethink such a risky move if serious bipartisan friction emerged in a Presidential Election year.

According to a secret report produced by NATO, Taliban detainees in Afghanistan remain convinced they will retake the country when the foreign force of about 130,000 soldiers goes home.

Under a current arrangement backed by NATO, most foreign combat forces would be gone by the end of 2014, but as war fatigue mounts in the West, that departure could come earlier.

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