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No `direct' Taliban talks

`We don't do that,' MacKay insists amid reports Canadian troops are seeking negotiations

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OTTAWA—The Conservative government's prohibition on negotiating with the Taliban was in disarray following reports that Canadian soldiers are seeking talks with insurgents.

Government ministers and military officials in Ottawa said there has been no change to Canada's hard-line policy against talking to enemy combatants.

"We're going to work with the Afghans in a democratic way, but we are not involved in any direct discussions with Taliban terrorists," said Defence Minister Peter MacKay said yesterday.

"We don't do that. We will not do that."

One senior military officer, speaking to reporters on background, said the Canadian Forces are looking into a *Globe and Mail* report that detailed the efforts of Sgt. Tim Seely with the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar to engage in talks with Taliban fighters.

The senior military officer said the Canadian Forces have started to "dig in to understand a little bit more of the context" of the surprising overture and reiterated the government ban on talks with the Taliban. The officer did allow that, on the face of it, Seely would appear to be in breach of official government rules.

"The soldier would have been speaking out of turn," the senior officer said.

The United States and Canada have been alone among NATO allies in southern Afghanistan in their refusal to talk with the militants.

Ahmed Wali Karzai, head of the Kandahar provincial council, said something needs to be done to stop "the madness" of the deadly insurgency.

"I absolutely support the Canadian decision," Karzai, the half-brother of Afghan president Hamid Karzai, told The Canadian Press yesterday.

"It's a very wise and proper decision. There are people (with whom) we can talk and reason."

On Parliament Hill, the Conservative government was peppered with questions by opposition MPs, some of whom have been accused of being Taliban sympathizers for suggesting peace talks with insurgents.

"We've called for this for some time. We believe it's fundamental to ultimately finding a solution in Afghanistan because there's no military end in sight or possible," said NDP Leader Jack Layton, who has been mockingly referred to by Conservative MPs and military hawks as "Taliban Jack."

"We do believe that discussions with the insurgency should really be supervised by the United Nations, not by the military for whom this is not really the primary expertise."

International Aid Minister Bev Oda reiterated that a special committee of cabinet ministers is reviewing "all aspects" of the government's Afghan policy playbook, something that should be completed in the coming weeks. But so far nothing has changed, she said.

"We continue to support the reconciliation process by supporting the Afghan government," Oda said.

The Afghan government has an official policy of national reconciliation that involves making peace with junior Taliban fighters who agree to lay down their weapons and renounce violence, but the insurgent leadership has set impossible terms for a peace deal, including the departure of all foreign fighters and the re-establishment of an Islamic theocracy.

"There would be so many Taliban willing to come home," said Ahmed Wali Karzai. "Nobody supports this madness; this killing of innocent people; the killing of women and children. They are not happy with it, we know this."

The Dutch, British and German armies, as well as neighbouring Pakistan, have all taken part in talks with

insurgents, though official NATO and United Nations policy is to let the Afghan government take the lead in such overtures, providing only support if it is sought.

The British brokered a ceasefire with the Taliban in the Musa Quala region of Helmand Province, a deal that ultimately fell apart.

Negotiation through the local governor is a cornerstone of the Dutch strategy in Urzugan province.

"I think it's important that we all engage in outreach in a co-ordinated way in the communities where we are engaged," said Kai Eide, the UN's special representative for Afghanistan. "When it comes to the wider question of reconciliation I think as the minister just said, there are certain considerations that must be respected."

Eide, a Norwegian diplomat, said peace talks must be led by the Afghan government; driven by a political process, not a military one; and based on the Afghan constitution, which contains the underpinnings of the fragile democratic state.

With files from The Canadian Press