

Ventura County Star Brian Head Resort PR Promotion

Thursday, March 24, 2011

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12A » Thursday, March 24, 2011 » THE STAR

**WORLD**

**Report: Time is now for Afghan war talks**

By Deb Riechmann  
Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — The war in Afghanistan has reached a stalemate and the best time to jump-start a political settlement with the Taliban is now, according to a report released Wednesday by a U.S. think tank.

The report, issued by the Century Foundation, said the U.S. and Afghanistan's neighbors, especially Pakistan, must play key roles in any negotiations. Demands that the Taliban sever ties with al-Qaida or that foreign troops exit the nation, for example, should be considered goals, not preconditions of talks, the 126-page report said. The group also proposed that a neutral party, perhaps the United Nations, be named to facilitate the process.

The report was released as President Hamid Karzai, for the second day in a row, called on the Taliban to lay down their weapons. At a high school in Kabul, Karzai pleaded with the Taliban to stop burning schools and reconcile with the government.

"Once again I'm calling to the Taliban: Make friendship with education and come and make peace," Karzai said. "Let the Afghan children stand on their feet and then the foreigners will voluntarily leave. They will not come back and we won't need

them. ... If you're going to burn the schools, it means you are the friend of the foreigners."

Karzai has had informal contacts with Taliban figures, but no formal peace talks are under way. Publicly, the Taliban say they won't negotiate as long as foreign forces are in Afghanistan. The Afghan government and the U.S. have said they will reconcile only with members of the Taliban who renounce violence, cut ties with al-Qaida and embrace the Afghan constitution.

"Both sides have set preconditions for talking to their foes that may reflect the concerns of highest priority to them, but which should no longer prevent their talking to each other," the report said. "Fulfillment of each specific point should be their goals in a political settlement."

The study was written by a task force set up by the Century Foundation, a nonprofit public policy research institution based in New York and Washington. The task force, led by Lakhdar Brahimi, former U.N. special representative for Afghanistan, and Thomas Pickering, a former ambassador and U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs, met with senior policymakers and analysts in a dozen countries.

"Bringing peace to Af-

ghanistan after more than 30 years of war is a daunting task," the report concludes. "But no side can now be confident of securing a military victory; none in the past 30 years has proved durable. As the country's contending sides slip into uneasy stalemate, the time to open negotiations to end the war is upon us."

In London, Gen. David Petraeus, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, said there were some signs of progress on reconciliation.

"There have been contacts, but I don't want to overstate them, and I obviously couldn't say how many there have been in recent months," Petraeus said in a speech at the Royal United Services Institute, a military think tank.

Petraeus said countries engaged in military combat in Afghanistan must play only a limited role in helping to craft a political solution to the conflict.

"We should absolutely seek reconciliation, (but) it has to be Afghan-led," Petraeus said. "This can't be something that NATO countries can do for Afghanistan."

On Tuesday, Karzai announced the first seven areas of the country where Afghan policemen and soldiers will start taking charge of security from the U.S.-led NATO coalition in

July. That coincides with President Barack Obama's goal of withdrawing some U.S. troops from Afghanistan in July if conditions allow. Karzai wants Afghan forces to be in the lead across the entire nation by the end of 2014.

Lawrence Korb, a member of the task force and a former U.S. assistant secretary of defense, told reporters on a conference call Wednesday that withdrawing some U.S. troops in July will give the Taliban a "face-saving" opportunity to engage in talks and it will send a signal that Americans are not "occupiers."

"I think we have reversed the momentum of the Taliban but it's important to begin the negotiations now," he said.

The task force said the U.S. will be a — if not the — most essential party in any peace negotiations with the Taliban.

"The process cannot prosper without full American support and leadership," the report said.

Last month, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the United States was launching a "diplomatic surge to move this conflict toward a political outcome that shatters the alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaida, ends the insurgency, and helps to produce not only a more stable Afghanistan but a more stable region.

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