

Press Releases: Senior State Department Official On Afghanistan Ceasefire Announcement

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Official
Via Teleconference
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MODERATOR: Thank you, ma'am, and good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining us for today's background call on the ceasefire in Afghanistan. Joining us today on the call is [Senior State Department Official]. We will refer to him as a senior – the Senior State Department Official. As a reminder, this call is on background and the contents of the call will be embargoed until the end.

So with that, I'll turn it over to [Senior State Department Official] for some opening statements, and then we'll take some questions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Great, thank you very much. Nice to be with all of you remotely here today. I assume you've all seen Secretary Pompeo's statement welcoming President Ghani's offer of a temporary ceasefire with the Taliban during the upcoming Eid al-Fitr holiday. This offer of a ceasefire and an intent by the Afghan Government and Afghan Security Forces to temporarily suspend offensive operations against the Taliban during the Eid holiday comes in response to a call earlier in the week from the Afghan Ulema for reductions in violence, an end to the violence and the conflict overall, and I think underscores the Afghan Government's continued commitment to searching for ways to bring this conflict to a close and, in the meantime, to look for ways to reduce its horrible impact on the Afghan people.

We understand that prior to announcing the ceasefire offer, President Ghani consulted with leaders of the prominent organizations and groupings that participated in the jihad against the Soviets and received pretty much unconditional, uniform support from them for this concept. And in so offering this ceasefire opportunity, I think President Ghani is responding to and indeed reflecting the desire of a wide cross-section of Afghans – both geographically, ethnically, and in terms of both urban and rural populations – in desiring to see a reduction in violence and a way forward to an end to the conflict.

So with that, we obviously – as you saw in Secretary Pompeo's statement, we're calling on and looking to the Taliban to respond favorably, and we

certainly hope that other countries who have supported the Afghan Government's efforts to promote a peaceful settlement to the conflict would also be encouraging them to do so.

And with that, I'll pause and take your questions.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll go to our first question.

OPERATOR: Our first question comes from the line of Ryan Browne with CNN. Your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi, yes. Thank you for doing this. I just wanted to ask whether or not the U.S. played any role in the run-up to this announcement of kind of getting – making Pakistan aware or working with Pakistan. And have you seen any signs running up to the announcement itself or since the announcement that the Taliban are receptive to this?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you. So to your first question, this is an Afghan Government initiative responding to desires from within Afghan society, and we're certainly hopeful that both the Taliban and those organizations or countries that have some degree of influence with the Taliban will equally support this limited duration ceasefire.

I think the fact that the Taliban has not yet rejected the offer – just as they have not formally rejected President Ghani's offer of a settlement process provided back in February at the Kabul Process – indicates they may be prepared to entertain it and observe it. And we certainly hope that will be the case, but we'll have to wait and see how they respond.

MODERATOR: Thank you. We'll take the next question, please.

OPERATOR: Once again, if you have a question, please hit *1. Our next question comes from the line of Spencer Ackerman with The Daily Beast. Your line is open.

QUESTION: Thanks very much for doing the call. Will the United States negotiate with the Taliban directly, as the Taliban has requested? And how will you answer the criticism that the Afghan Government, supported by the United States, is essentially taking a position of unilateral ceasefire here, given that the Taliban hasn't responded to it and wasn't a party to negotiating a ceasefire?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, we believe anything that reduces the violence in Afghanistan, whether it's temporarily or more importantly in the long term, is a good thing. Now, in this case, we have the Government of Afghanistan expressing a willingness to reduce violence, because frankly most of the violence in Afghanistan these days comes in response to operations and violence perpetrated by the Taliban or Daesh, by ISIS Khorasan.

With respect to the Taliban, they have an opportunity here to respond to calls from a wide cross-section of Afghans asking for a reduction in violence, which we think would show that it's possible in the course of this long conflict to reduce violence. Obviously, it would be better in the long

term if a ceasefire stemmed from a negotiated political settlement, but a temporary ceasefire for an Eid certainly doesn't preclude that possibility down the road and hopefully helps contribute to realizing that objective.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: And on the question of whether the U.S. will negotiate with the Taliban directly, as the Taliban has requested.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, I'd refer you back to statements that colleagues have made previously to that question.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: The question comes from the line of Nicholas Wadhams with Bloomberg News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. [Senior State Department Official], do you have any sense for how long, given the current situation in Afghanistan, you expect U.S. troops to remain in the country?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, as you know from the strategy that the administration put in place last year, we're frankly focused less on a specific duration and more on the conditions in Afghanistan that would enable us to reduce a footprint. And Afghan Government officials, President Ghani, Dr. Abdullah the chief executive, they're focused on the same things. No one in Afghanistan wants to see the Afghan Government devoting the bulk of its own resources to security as opposed to the other critical needs in the society to promote economic development, to promote improvements in health care and education and all the things that most people want to see in a stabilized society.

We certainly don't want to sustain force levels and operations in Afghanistan any longer than is absolutely necessary. And what we're all focused on is trying to find the right formula that enables us to reduce operations, and that comes from a political settlement where the Taliban is no longer posing a threat to the Afghan people and no longer creating the conditions under which ISIS Khorasan or other international terrorist organizations can take advantage of instability in Afghanistan to plot and plan attacks against the United States or our allies.

QUESTION: But does it discourage you that after 17 years you haven't been able to find that formula yet?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think everybody involved in this effort, whether they were part of it at the outset or whether they've come to it later in the process, is mindful of the complexity of the challenges but very much desiring to find that formula. And I think under the current environment in the region, in the wider region, we're focused on producing the results that achieve the outcomes we're all seeking.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. We'll go to the next question now.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Missy Ryan with *The Washington Post*. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, [Senior State Department Official]. Missy Ryan from the *Post*. Can you tell us – it sounds like from what you said earlier that this ceasefire came together after the Ulema gathering this week. Can you tell us how much heads-up was the United States given before the announcement today? And do you worry at all that the announcement of the ceasefire could be detrimental to the morale of Afghan forces, if they make sacrifices on the battlefield? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Sure. So with respect to your first question, as you've seen, U.S. forces will be supporting the Afghan Government's efforts in this regard, in terms of suspending certain – well, suspending offensive operations during the ceasefire, but being prepared to respond if fired upon in self-defense. And I understand U.S. forces also will be continuing offensive operations or supporting offensive operations against ISIS Khorasan because this does not apply to them. Obviously, there was a bit of discussion in advance to ensure that U.S. forces and coalition forces, which are there to support Afghan Security Forces, were – would be in a position to be able to support this initiative and to do a bit of work to figure out how to put it into place.

With respect to the impacts on morale, I think that's a question better posed to Afghan leaders. My impression has been that Afghan forces, just like U.S. or coalition counterparts, would prefer not to be fighting if they have an alternative. They're fighting when they need to. They've been conducting significant operations, offensive operations, this year with a great deal of persistence and bravery. But I think in this case, to get an operational pause and to see if the Taliban is willing to take up that offer and reduce violence for a period of time, I imagine they would welcome that.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. We'll go to the next question now.

OPERATOR: Our next question is coming from the line of Gardiner Harris with *The New York Times*.

QUESTION: Hi. The Secretary spoke with the Pakistani military chief last night before the ceasefire was announced. Did they talk about the ceasefire? Obviously one of the questions in Afghanistan is what role Pakistan played in this ceasefire announcement and what role the Americans played in this ceasefire announcement. I think you keep emphasizing that this is an Afghan Government initiative. There is suspicion throughout Afghanistan that it was pushed by the Americans and the Pakistanis. Can you address that and specific – and be very specific about whether it was a topic of discussion yesterday between the Secretary and the chief of staff?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I can't speak to that specific conversation. I don't – I wasn't privy to the call. I don't think it's accurate to say that the ceasefire is a U.S. initiative, but I think it's accurate to say, obviously, as you've seen from our statements, that we welcome the initiative that President Ghani has taken in this regard. And I

think the fact that it has been welcomed by a cross-section of leaders and is responding to a call from a significant voice in Afghan society in the form of the Ulema speaks to the strong desire across the country for reduced levels of violence and for the government to be exploring new ways to try to get a settlement process going and to see if there are ways the Taliban can be encouraged to drop their opposition to sitting down and talking with the legitimate Government of Afghanistan. That continues to be the only obstacle at this point to starting a settlement process that would lead over time, we would expect, to permanently reduced levels of violence.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll go on to the next call.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Conor Finnegan with ABC News.

QUESTION: Hey. Thank you, [Senior State Department Official], for doing this. I just had a quick question about something that General Nicholson said last week. He alluded to – sorry, sorry for the noise. He alluded to some secret peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan Government, saying there was a robust dialogue with tremendous potential. Can you update us on whether or not there are peace talks going on between the two sides, and if so, whether the U.S. supports that?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm not going to speak to specific diplomacy because, obviously, its potential success is dependent in part on a degree of confidentiality of that type of process. What I would say is that we continue to support and explore, along with our allies and other partners in the coalition, the best ways to promote a political settlement that would stem from talks between the main parties to this conflict in the form of the Taliban and the Afghan Government. We strongly supported the efforts that resulted in President Ghani's unprecedented offer and framework for what a settlement process could look like that he provided at the Kabul Process Conference back in late February. And then I think it's important to remember it was endorsed by every country in the region and all the members of the coalition and all the other significant interested parties and countries trying to find that formula that brings about a peaceful settlement.

So really, the question here is how we can all best continue to work to create that settlement process in a way that brings the conflict to a close. And obviously, a number of governments have a role to play in producing that result, and there are a range of ongoing conversations between the United States and allies and partners and other governments about how we can best achieve that result.

MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. And we'll take our last question now.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Mirwais Rahmani, Voice of America. Your line is open.

QUESTION: Yes. Thank you, [Senior State Department Official], for your time. So the peace, the ceasefire will include the Haqqani Network. Both the Haqqani Network and its leader are listed as designated terrorist

organization and individual, so how the U.S. troops in Afghanistan will deal with this?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, as noted in our statement, we're going to approach this with the perspective of supporting the Afghan Security Forces in implementing the ceasefire. What this means is that during the ceasefire period, the Afghan Security Forces won't be conducting offensive operations, and the U.S. Government – U.S. military forces therefore will be in a similar posture with respect to the Taliban. However, if Afghan Security Forces are attacked or if there are attacks by the Taliban or its constituent elements in this period, certainly Afghan Security Forces can and will respond, I would imagine, and U.S. forces will be postured and poised to support them in doing so.

MODERATOR: All right. And that concludes our call today. Thank you, everyone, for joining us. The embargo is now lifted, and enjoy the rest of your afternoon.

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