

US deal with Taliban breaks down while coronavirus spreads in Afghanistan

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A “peace” deal concluded between Washington and the Taliban Islamist movement that was supposed to bring an end to US imperialism’s longest war is rapidly unraveling amid rising violence and the failure of the crisis-ridden Kabul regime to carry out a prisoner release agreement brokered by Washington.

The Taliban warned on Sunday that the agreement signed in the Qatari capital of Doha on February 29 is breaking down under the impact of what it charges are US violations in the form of airstrikes that have targeted its forces and killed civilians.

The latest reported airstrike took place early Sunday in the central Afghan province of Uruzgan, leaving at least eight civilians killed and two others gravely wounded according to regional officials. The Taliban blamed the US and its NATO-led “coalition” for the attack.

In another incident on Sunday, the Taliban charged that an airstrike carried out against a funeral in southern Zabul province killed two civilians. The Afghan Ministry of Defense claimed that its forces had attacked Taliban fighters there after a clash at a checkpoint manned by security forces of the Kabul regime.

Warning that its deal with the US was reaching the breaking point, the Taliban stated that the attacks had created “an atmosphere of mistrust that will not only damage the agreements, but also force the mujaheddin to a similar response and will increase the level of fighting.”

A spokesman for the US military dismissed the Taliban charges as “baseless,” while insisting that American occupation forces “will defend our ANDSF [Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces] partners if attacked.”

Negotiations between the Taliban and the Kabul regime on a prisoner swap have also broken down, with the Islamist movement announcing that it was withdrawing its negotiating team from the Afghan capital after what it termed a series of “fruitless meetings.”

An agreement that Kabul would release 5,000 Taliban prisoners in return for the freeing of 1,000 soldiers, police and other pro-regime elements was part of the deal signed with the US in Doha. It was described as a “confidence-building measure” that was to precede “inter-Afghan” talks that had been scheduled for March 10.

The US-backed Kabul government headed by President Ashraf Ghani, however, said that it had not been party to this agreement. The Taliban refused to negotiate with it, regarding it as a US puppet, and Washington tacitly acknowledged this characterization by excluding it from the talks. The Kabul regime subsequently attempted to link the prisoner release to the imposition of new conditions upon the Taliban, including a halt to attacks on government security forces.

The Doha-based Taliban political spokesman Suhail Shaheen said that the technical team sent to Kabul would not continue participating in “fruitless meetings,” charging that the release of the movement’s prisoners had been repeatedly “delayed under one pretext or another.”

Spokesmen for Ghani’s government have claimed that the Taliban has demanded the release of 15 of its senior commanders held prisoner by the regime. Matin Bek, a member of the government’s negotiating team, told reporters on Monday that the government refused the demand. “We don’t want them to go back to the battlefield and capture a whole province.”

The regime is loath to release the prisoners without extracting concessions from the Taliban. It sees them as one of its few bargaining chips under conditions in which the Taliban has gained control over more territory than at any time since the October 2001 US invasion that overthrew the regime headed by the Islamist movement. Today, over half the country is either controlled or contested by the Taliban.

The Kabul regime’s negotiations with the Taliban have been hamstrung in part by its continuing failure to resolve

its own internal crisis over a disputed presidential election held last September, whose results were announced only in late February, proclaiming incumbent Ghani the victor.

His challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, who had been installed as “chief executive” as part of a US-brokered deal following the last disputed election, charged that the results were the result of fraud and claimed that he was the legitimate president. Both he and Ghani held simultaneous inauguration ceremonies last month. Abdullah declared all actions by Ghani illegitimate and went so far as to appoint one of his loyalists as governor of Sar-e Pol province in north-central Afghanistan.

On March 23, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made an unscheduled trip to Afghanistan, where he announced that Washington was cutting off \$1 billion in aid to the Kabul regime this year and would do the same in 2021 if the two rivals did not reach an accommodation. According to a report by NBC this week, he also threatened that the US would carry out a complete withdrawal of all of its troops from the country.

Under the agreement signed in Doha, the number of US troops in Afghanistan was supposed to be cut from the present deployment of 13,000 to 8,600 by July, with a complete withdrawal within 14 months. In return, the Taliban pledged to deny the use of Afghan soil by Al Qaeda or any other group that poses a threat to the “security interests” of the US and its allies.

The threat of renewed fighting, government paralysis and the slashing of US aid—with foreign aid accounting for 40 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP—comes amid a mounting threat that the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic will exact a devastating toll on the country’s impoverished population.

After more than 18 years of US war and occupation, the country’s health care system is devastated, while over 40 percent of its 38.4 million people live below the poverty line, without access to clean water or sewerage systems and living in crowded communal dwellings. There are more than 1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan as a result of the war, while millions more have fled into exile.

The threat that the coronavirus will sweep the country is based not only on these social conditions, but also on the impact of hundreds of thousands of Afghan migrant workers returning from Iran, having lost their jobs as a result of the coronavirus outbreak and the impact of tightening US sanctions. Iran has one of the highest rates of infection in the world, with over 62,000 confirmed cases and nearly 4,000 deaths. Both figures are believed

to be extreme underestimates.

Afghanistan has reported only 423 cases and 14 deaths thus far, but with the near total absence of testing and the lack of medical care for much of the population, these figures are a fraction of the real toll.

In the western province of Herat, on the border with Iran, officials have reported that 41 health care workers from one regional hospital have tested positive with coronavirus. Doctors and nurses there say that they lack personal protection equipment. On Monday, there was the first case of a doctor dying from the disease at a private hospital in Kabul.

More than 200,000 Afghans have poured back across the border from Iran since the beginning of the year. At the height of this exodus last month, 15,000 were crossing a day. None of them were checked for symptoms or subjected to quarantines, and they have scattered throughout the country, doubtless many carrying the virus with them.

The path for the coronavirus to ravage Afghanistan has been paved by a US war of aggression that has killed or wounded hundreds of thousands of Afghans and laid waste to the entire country, while claiming the lives of nearly 2,400 US troops.

While the estimated cost of this war is over one trillion dollars, Washington has offered a miserable \$15 million in aid to Afghanistan to fight the pandemic. Imperialist foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. Just as the ruling class is shoveling trillions of dollars into Wall Street, the banks and corporations while failing to provided resources to save the lives of the sick or protect those of health care workers at home, so it is prepared to spend a trillion dollars on war in Afghanistan, while offering a pittance to stem the tide of the pandemic sweeping over the war-torn and impoverished country.



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