

Peace talks in Moscow 'not about holding negotiations', say Taliban

Moscow on Friday hosted international talks on Afghanistan aimed at kickstarting direct negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban militant group, both of whom sent delegations.

Russia hopes "through joint efforts to open a new page in the history of Afghanistan," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said as the talks opened at a Moscow hotel on Friday morning.

He said that the participation of both Afghan leaders and the Taliban was an "important contribution" aimed at creating "favourable conditions for the start of direct talks".

"I am counting on you holding a serious and constructive conversation that will justify the hopes of the Afghan people," he said before the talks continued behind closed doors.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid told *AFP* that the militant group was sending five representatives. They will not hold "any sort of negotiations" with the delegation of Kabul administration, he said.

"This conference is not about holding negotiations with any party whatsoever, rather it is about finding a peaceful solution to the issue of Afghanistan," he added.

This is the first time that a Taliban delegation is taking part in such high-level international meeting, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Thursday.

The Taliban is banned from operating in Russia as it is classified as a "terrorist organisation".

The Afghan delegation is made up of four representatives of the High Peace Council, a government body responsible for reconciliation efforts with the militants, spokesman Sayed Ihsan Taheri said.

The Afghan foreign ministry has emphasised that the council does not represent the Afghan government at the meeting, however.

Moscow said it had invited representatives from the United States (US) as well as India, Iran, China, Pakistan and five former Soviet republics in Central Asia.

Pakistan, which has long been accused of providing support to the Afghan Taliban, would “definitely” attend, foreign ministry spokesman Muhammad Faisal told *AFP*.

The US embassy in Moscow was sending a representative to observe the discussions.

The Moscow meeting was initially scheduled to take place in September but was postponed after Kabul insisted that the process should be Afghan-led.

The meeting comes at a sensitive time. Newly appointed US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad has been trying to convince the Taliban to agree to negotiate an end to the war and there are fears the Russian meeting could derail those efforts.

A US government watchdog last week said Kabul’s control of Afghanistan had slipped in recent months as local security forces suffered record casualties while making minimal or no progress against the Taliban.