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Russia Lauds Taliban Efforts to Stabilize Afghanistan, Warns on Terrorism

By Marina Lapenkova for AFP

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Taliban (banned in Russia) official Abdul Salam Hanafi is seen prior to the 3rd meeting of the Moscow Format on the Afghanistan peace settlement at President Hotel. **Sergei Bobylev / TASS**

Russia on Wednesday recognized Taliban efforts to try and stabilize the situation in Afghanistan but expressed concern that "terrorist" groups threatened the stability of the entire region.

Russia is hosting the Taliban for talks as the Kremlin seeks to assert its influence on Central Asia and push for action against Islamic State fighters which it says have massed in the perennially volatile country.

The talks are one of the Taliban's most high-profile international meetings since seizing power in mid-August.

"A new administration is in power now," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told officials

from 10 countries including China and Pakistan.

"We note their efforts to stabilize the military and political situation and set up work of the state apparatus."

But Russia's top diplomat also said that "numerous terrorist groups" including Islamic State fighters and al-Qaeda have been seeking to exploit a security vacuum in the country and raise their profile.

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Lavrov expressed regret that U.S. officials did not take part in the talks.

He urged the international community to mobilize and provide Kabul with "effective" aid to prevent a humanitarian crisis and a further refugee exodus.

The talks come after Russian President Vladimir Putin warned last week that IS fighters were gathering in Afghanistan to spread discord in former Soviet republics flanking Russia.

The Taliban delegation is headed by Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi, a senior figure in the new Afghan leadership who led talks with the European Union and the United States last week.

Those followed talks in Ankara between the Taliban and Turkish officials.

Brussels has pledged one billion euros ($1.2 billion) to avert a humanitarian crisis after the hardline group's takeover.

Moscow has reached out to the Taliban and hosted its representatives in Moscow several times in recent years, even though the Taliban is a designated terrorist organisation in Russia.

Terrorism and drug concerns

Putin and senior Russian officials have been voicing a slew of security-related concerns since the Taliban wrested control of Afghanistan and foreign troops pulled out after nearly 20 years.

The Russian president cautioned last week that some 2,000 fighters loyal to the Islamic State group had converged in northern Afghanistan, adding that their leaders planned to send them into neighbouring Central Asian countries disguised as refugees.

After the Taliban's takeover, Russia ran military drills alongside ex-Soviet countries neighbouring Afghanistan.

Lavrov has warned that drug trafficking from Afghanistan had reached "unprecedented" levels, a concern echoed by the Kremlin during meetings with other Central Asia countries and China.

Despite reaching out to the Taliban, Putin and Russian officials have in recent weeks made clear Moscow is not moving towards formal recognition of the Islamist regime.

"The official recognition is not being discussed and that has been stated publicly," Lavrov has said.

In the 1980s, Moscow fought a disastrous decade-long war in Afghanistan that killed up to two million Afghans, forced seven million more from their homes and led to the deaths of more than 14,000 Soviet troops.

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