**Holbrooke to lighten terror list of Taliban**

By Colum Lynch

July 2, 2010

Foreign policy

*http://turtlebay.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/07/02/holbrooke\_to\_push\_for\_taliban\_free\_terror\_list*

Richard C. Holbrooke, the White House's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, will travel to New York on Tuesday to help Afghanistan negotiate the removal of select Taliban members from a U.N. anti-terror blacklist, according to senior U.N.-based officials.

Holbrooke's decision to visit New York comes weeks after Afghan President Hamid Karzai appealed to the U.N. Security Council to drop Taliban from a list of individuals targeted with travel and financial sanctions, a first step in an effort to convince Taliban militants to end their insurgency and strike a peace deal with the government. The Afghan government's June 6 "peace jirga" on June 6 called for taking steps towards reconciliation with the Taliban, including the removal of former Taliban officials from the U.N. blacklist.

The Security Council is now reviewing the status of 15 former Taliban members on the watch list, including a former Taliban education minister, Mullah Arsala Rahmani, who is currently serving in the Afghan senate. According to council diplomats, President Karzai is expected to present the council's sanctions committee with a letter arguing that the 15 former Taliban have renounced terrorism and are no longer involved in the violent overthrow of his government.

The Afghan effort has been stalled by Russia, which has maintained that Karzai's government has provided insufficient evidence to remove the Afghans from the list. Russia made it clear that it takes a very hard line on the removal from the blacklist of Taliban who are still engaged in terrorist or military activities. On March 22, Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vitaly I. Churkin, told the council "that dialogue is possible only with those who have laid down arms, recognized the government and constitution of Afghanistan, and broken their links with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups."

But U.S. and Afghan officials hope that Russia, which agreed to delist a smaller group of five former Taliban officials in January, will be willing to at least let a limited number off the list, sending a signal to other Taliban fighters that it is possible to achieve relief from the U.N. measures. Council diplomats say the names under consideration do not include the Taliban's leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, or other combatants currently participating in the insurgency.

In advance of the talks, the United States made an important concession to Moscow. Last month, the State Department designated a Chechen separatist commander, Doku Umarov, a terrorist. Umarov and his followers have claimed responsibility for a number of violent actions, including a suicide bombing in Moscow's subway system. The decision, which was announced on the eve of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's White House summit with President Barack Obama, marked a shift in standard U.S. protocol. The U.S. usually places an individual on the U.S. terror list before pressing for his or her inclusion on the U.N. blacklist, but in this instance that was not the case. But U.N.-based officials said it was unclear whether the United States received assurances that Russia would respond by yielding ground on the Taliban sanctions.

The U.N. Security Council first imposed sanctions on the Taliban government in October 1999 for harboring Osama bin Laden, and refusing to surrender him to U.S. authorities for his alleged role in masterminding the August 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa. More than 100 Taliban leaders were added to the list in January 2001.

After the September 11 terror attacks, the United States ushered through resolutions that added al Qaeda members and their supporters to the sanctions list. The measures included a travel ban, an arms embargo, and a prohibition on the direct or indirect provision of funds or economic resources. To authorize the removal of someone from the list, the resolution requires evidence that Taliban members have renounced violence, expressed support for the Afghan government and its constitution, and severed their links to al Qaeda. But efforts to reward individuals who break ranks with the Taliban and rally behind Karzai's government have run up against resistance from Russia.

"The Russian position is perfectly reasonable," said Richard Barrett, who oversees a committee responsible for monitoring implementation of the sanctions against the Taliban and al Qaeda. "People should not come off the list just because there is a political process. Mullah Omar and others aren't prevented from participating in the political process even though they are on the list."

But Afghanistan has increased pressure on Russia and other council members to reverse course, arguing that the sanctions list is an impediment to prospects for a peace settlement with the Taliban. Karzai met with a visiting delegation of Security Council members last month and appealed to them to remove names from the list. Some officials indicated that Karzai and his advisors had requested that the entire list of 137 Taliban be eliminated. But others challenged that account, saying that Karzai only asked that some Taliban officials be delisted.

In January, Russian government lifted its objection to delisting Wakil Ahmad Mutawakkil, a minister of foreign affairs in the former Taliban government, and Abdul Hakim Monib Muhammad Nazar, another former Taliban official who broke ranks with the movement and served as Karzai's governor in Uruzgan. Russia has also agreed to delist Fazl Muhammad Faizan Qamaruddin, Shams-us-Safa Aminzai, and Muhammad Musa Hotak Abdul Mehdi.

The Afghan leader is seeking to make progress on reconciling with the Taliban in advance of a major international conference in Kabul on July 20 aimed at supporting the stability of Afghanistan. Among the strongest advocates are Afghan politicians, like Mullah Rahmani, who stand to benefit directly from the delisting. Rahmani claims to have links to the Taliban and to have established indirect communications to Mullah Omar.

"The blacklist will be a start," he told the New York Times. "It is symbolically very important. Even if they only move 60 or 70 names, that would be enough. The next stop could be talks between government and Taliban representatives in some neutral country."