

## Christian volunteers

SEOUL, Aug. 28 — Representatives of [Taliban](#) and the South Korean government said they had concluded face-to-face negotiations today over [fates](#) of 19 South Korean church volunteers the Taliban has held captive in Afghanistan since mid-July.

But it was not immediately clear whether reports in Seoul and elsewhere that [Taliban](#) had agreed to release the 19 hostages were accurate.

In Afghanistan, Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, a Taliban spokesman, confirmed that the talks in the central Afghan town of Ghazni had concluded, but he declined to give further information. He said he was not yet aware of how the talks had ended.

Separately, [Associated Press](#) quoted Mr. Ahmadi as saying an agreement had been reached, but giving no further details.

South Korean officials indicated that they thought a deal for [release](#) of the hostages had been sealed today when face-to-face talks resumed after several days of telephone contacts between [two sides](#).

"We welcome the agreement to release 19 South Koreans," said Cheon Ho Seon, a spokesman for President Roh Moo Hyun, who has been under intense domestic pressure to win the safe return of [hostages](#), most of whom are women in their 20s and 30s. [hostage crisis](#) has emerged as a major test for President Roh, whose term ends in February.

There was no indication that any hostages had actually been released, nor of when they would be. It was not known what the South Korean government may have offered to win their release.

[Taliban](#), the militant fundamentalist Islamic group that formerly ruled Afghanistan, has reneged on promises to release hostages in [past](#).

Its fighters seized a total of 23 Korean Christian volunteers on July 19 as they traveled by bus from Kabul to the southern city of Kandahar. The captors killed two male hostages after a series of deadlines passed without their demands being met. But when the South Korean government entered direct negotiations with [militants](#) last month, the Taliban freed two women in what they called a gesture of good will.

The talks in Ghazni took place in [offices](#) of the Afghan Red Crescent, the local partner of [International Committee of the Red Cross](#), the A.P. said. [Red Cross](#) also facilitated previous rounds of talks.

Members of the South Korean delegation were driven to the site of the meeting by Afghan intelligence officers, [news agency](#) reported; later, [two Taliban representatives](#) were taken to the compound in a Red Cross vehicle.

The insurgents demanded the withdrawal of [roughly 200 South Korean troops](#) currently in Afghanistan, and the release of militant prisoners. South Korea responded that its troops were already scheduled to leave Afghanistan by the end of the year.

The South Korean side has also repeatedly appealed to the Afghan and American governments, which are holding Taliban prisoners, to show [flexibility](#) over [militants' demands](#).

Officials in both Kabul and Washington said in response that they could not compromise their principle of refusing all concessions to terrorist demands. But [fact](#) that the Seoul government made [public appeals](#) may have demonstrated its sincerity to [Taliban leaders](#).

David Rohde contributed reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan.