

## Yemen ready for talks if rebels stop fighting

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Yemen will consider talks with Shi'ite rebels who have been fighting government forces in the north since early this year if they lay down their guns first, the foreign minister said yesterday.

"If they really want to start a dialogue, they should stop fighting and then call for dialogue and the Yemeni government will respond," Abubakr Al Qirbi said. "They should not call for dialogue while they are still fighting."

Yahya Al Houthi, the exiled brother of rebel leader Abdul-Malik Al Houthi, whose group is fighting the government in the northern province of Saada, said in a statement earlier this week the rebels were ready to cease fire and return to dialogue provided the army returned to its pre-war positions.

Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands have fled their homes in the latest bout of a conflict that has raged on and off since 2004. The flare-up began when the rebels attacked government forces who set up a checkpoint deeper inside Saada.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh has repeatedly said there is no room for dialogue and urged the rebels to surrender. Qirbi said previous government efforts to talk to the rebels, members of the Zaydi sect, had failed. "From 2004, the government of Yemen used dialogue, tried to rebuild the area and used all means to address the root causes of the issue," he said.

"But dialogue got the government nowhere as these people do not seem to understand that violence only brings violence. If they want to fight America and Israel it cannot happen in Yemen."

If the rebels want political change, they should pursue it through the political system, not violence, Qirbi said.