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Militants Draw New Front Line Inside Pakistan

By [JANE PERLEZ](#)

PESHAWAR, [Pakistan](#), Nov. 1 — For much of the last century, the mountainous region of Swat was ruled as a princely kingdom where a benign autocrat, the wali, bestowed schools for girls, health care for everyone and the chance to get a degree abroad for the talented.

Now the region is the newest front line in the battle between Islamic militants, who are sympathetic to the [Taliban](#) and [Al Qaeda](#), and Pakistan's nervous security forces. For the first time, heavy fighting has moved beyond Pakistan's tribal fringe and into more settled areas of the country.

On Thursday, government forces backed by helicopters attacked about 500 militants in the area, killing about 60 men, said Badshah Gul Wazir, the home secretary for the North-West Frontier Province. The militants said they had captured 44 members of the Frontier Corps and were holding them hostage.

The battles are part of what has become an expanding insurgency within Pakistan, aimed directly at the government of Gen. [Pervez Musharraf](#), the president, rather than at the [NATO](#) and American forces across the Afghan border who have been the target for several years.

Many here say the militancy is fueled by anger over the government alliance with the Bush administration and what is seen as a pro-American agenda that has grown in prominence with the return of the opposition leader [Benazir Bhutto](#). She has accused the militants of trying to take over the country.

The conflict in Swat reflects many of the reasons Pakistan has become such a dangerous place in recent years: the aggressiveness of the militants, the passivity of the government and its security forces, and the starved civilian apparatus, including schools and hospitals, which has failed to provide the backbone for a counterinsurgency strategy.

So grave is the threat that more than 2,000 Pakistani soldiers were dispatched to quell the militants in the Swat area in July. But for three months they were intimidated and mostly inactive. Reinforcements sent last week were hit by a suicide bomber who killed 17 paramilitary soldiers. That provoked the government action on Thursday.

The widening intimidation by the militants takes many forms. Two days after the suicide attack, the heads of two members of the Frontier Constabulary were paraded through the dusty streets of Matta, a village about 20 miles north of Saidu Sharif, the capital of Swat.

Grim messages accompanied the heads. They called the soldiers allies of the United States and threatened to behead anyone else who sided with the Americans, said residents here who had received news from relatives in the area, which is too dangerous for foreign journalists to visit.

Since the clashes began last week, schools have been closed, a vital polio vaccination campaign for children has been abandoned and police posts have been left empty, residents said. Lawlessness rules, by their accounts.

“The militants control about 10 percent of the territory” of the North-West Frontier Province, where Swat is situated, said Sher Muhammad, a lawyer who lives in the area and here in Peshawar, where he was interviewed. “But psychologically they have terrorized the entire area. No one feels secure.”

The atmosphere of fear and uncertainty pervades not only the North-West Frontier Province but is also taking hold in Pakistan’s large cities, including the capital, Islamabad, and the nearby garrison city, Rawalpindi, where suicide attacks are now common.

Such attacks are increasingly deadly. The truck carrying Ms. Bhutto, the opposition leader, was hit by at least one suicide bomber during her arrival by motorcade in Karachi two weeks ago, killing 140 of her supporters.

Ms. Bhutto flew to her home in Dubai on Thursday after lying low for most of the week behind a curtain of security provided by her political party at her family compound in Karachi. Her spokesman said she was visiting her children and ailing mother.

“Pakistan is under siege,” said Farouk Adam Khan, a prominent lawyer and a former anticorruption prosecutor appointed by General Musharraf. “It’s the anger at the pro-American policies, particularly the Musharraf-Bush axis,” he said.

A briefing in March on law and order by the Home Department of the North-West Frontier Province, which is run by political allies of General Musharraf, showed that the government was well aware of the mounting militancy.

The briefing report, obtained by The New York Times, refers to “free movement of militants, their financial, physical and moral support growing.”

Another part of the briefing report states in stark terms: “Morale of law enforcement agents and the people supportive of government on the decline. Talibanization, lawlessness and terrorism on the rise.”

The briefing suggested that the government should lend support to moderate imams who would spread messages of tolerance, but that has yet to happen, a senior security official here said.

Another recommendation was to send more soldiers, which was done in July to little effect.

Many of the militants around Swat are members of Tehreek Nifaz-e-Shariat Mohammadi — the Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Laws — one of a number of extremist groups allied with the Taliban in the area.

The movement, led by a fiery Islamic cleric, Maulana Fazlullah, was banned by the Musharraf government in 2002 but has steadily gained strength, particularly in the last year.

Mr. Fazlullah, who runs an FM radio station known as Maulana Radio, is the son-in-law of Sufi Muhammad,

the pro-Taliban founder of the movement who was imprisoned by the Pakistani authorities at the end of 2001.

Though he remains behind bars, the group has gained adherents, including retired army officers, according to Zia ur Rehman, an analyst at the Sustainable Policy Development Institute in Islamabad.

Other supporters include traders angered by the local government's policy of expanding taxes and farmers upset by high interest rates for loans to buy land.

Residents said that last year Mr. Fazlullah set up the FM radio station and began radical sermons calling for the restoration of the caliphate, the organization of Muslim power that held sway for centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

He singled out uneducated women. They readily answered his appeals for donations. They and others also responded to his appeals to turn off television sets — even burn them — and to shut down music and video shops.

Then Mr. Fazlullah's demands grew tougher, including a call for the banning of polio vaccinations for children, health officials here said. He claimed that the vaccination made men impotent.

This week, while a government-sponsored polio vaccination campaign took off in most of Pakistan, backed by [Unicef](#), it was canceled in Swat because the security situation was considered too risky, health officials said.

For women, the impact of the militants in Swat has been particularly devastating, said Rukhshanda Naz, the director of the Aurat Foundation, which works for women's rights.

Mr. Fazlullah demanded that girls' schools be closed, and nearly a dozen have been bombed in the last year, Ms. Naz said.

Civil servants sympathetic to the militants have been posted to Swat, a senior government official here said. They tried to work out a compromise: The schools would be kept open, but in a government letter, girls over 8 were instructed to wear burqas, Ms. Naz said.

Finally, in September, all the girls' schools were closed, she said.

Women who have won seats on local councils have also been warned not to turn up, she said.

"Women are expecting support from state institutions, but the state is failing to give it," Ms. Naz said.

A long way from Swat, in a well-appointed house in Islamabad decorated with photographs of [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis](#), the queen of England and Charles de Gaulle, the son of the last wali of Swat, Miangul Aurangzeb, 79, laments the fall of his beloved kingdom.

"An autocratic state can be a very nice one," Mr. Aurangzeb said in an interview in his living room. "My grandfather and father and myself were on the better side."

When the Pakistani government swallowed Swat in 1969, Mr. Aurangzeb's father stepped down. Although

he is the heir, Mr. Aurangzeb has never ruled.

He has his own explanation of why the militants are on the rise, a variation of that given by others in the region.

“Musharraf wants the support of the Americans, so he frightens the Americans and allows these people to come so Bush will give more money and weapons,” he said. “This could have been curbed a year ago.”

Suicide Bomber Kills 8

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, Nov. 1 — A suicide bomber on a motorbike struck a Pakistan Air Force bus on Thursday morning in Sargodha, killing eight people, including five officers, and wounding 27, air force officials said.

The attack in central Pakistan was the first on air force personnel, suggesting an escalation in the challenges to General Musharraf, whose authority has been undermined by growing unrest in tribal regions near the Afghan border. The attack occurred two days after a suicide bombing in Rawalpindi, the headquarters of the Pakistani military, in which seven people were killed.

Ismail Khan
contributed reporting.

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