

Nato's Top Brass Accuse Pakistan Over Taliban Aid

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By Ahmed Rashid in Kabul

Commanders from five Nato countries whose troops have just fought the bloodiest battle with the Taliban in five years, are demanding their governments get tough with Pakistan over the support and sanctuary its security services provide to the Taliban.

Nato's report on Operation Medusa, an intense battle that lasted from September 4-17 in the Panjwai district, demonstrates the extent of the Taliban's military capability and states clearly that Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence (ISI) is involved in supplying it.

Commanders from Britain, the US, Denmark, Canada and Holland are frustrated that even after Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf met George W Bush and Tony Blair last week, Western leaders are declining to call Mr Musharraf's bluff.

"It is time for an 'either you are with us or against us' delivered bluntly to Musharraf at the highest political level," said one Nato commander.

After the September 11 attacks in 2001 America gave Mr Musharraf a similar ultimatum to co-operate against the Taliban, who were then harbouring Osama bin Laden.

"Our boys in southern Afghanistan are hurting because of what is coming out of Quetta," he added.

The Taliban use the southern province of Balochistan to co-ordinate their insurgency and to recuperate after military action.

The cushion Pakistan is providing the Taliban is undermining the operation in Afghanistan, where 31,000 Nato troops are now based. The Canadians were most involved in Operation Medusa, two weeks of heavy fighting in a lush vineyard region, defeating 1,500 well entrenched Taliban, who had planned to attack Kandahar city, the capital of the south.

Nato officials now say they killed 1,100 Taliban fighters, not the 500 originally claimed. Hundreds of Taliban reinforcements in pick-up trucks who crossed over from Quetta - waved on by Pakistani border guards - were destroyed by Nato air and artillery strikes.

Nato captured 160 Taliban, many of them Pakistanis who described in detail the ISI's support to the Taliban.

Nato is now mapping the entire Taliban support structure in Balochistan, from ISI- run training camps near Quetta to huge ammunition dumps, arrival points for Taliban's new weapons and meeting places of the shura, or leadership council, in Quetta, which is headed by Mullah Mohammed Omar, the group's leader since its creation a dozen years ago.

Nato and Afghan officers say two training camps for the Taliban are located just outside Quetta, while the group is using hundreds of madrassas where the fighters are housed and fired up ideologically before being sent to the front.

Many madrassas now being listed are run by the Jamiat-e-Ullemah Islam, a political party that governs Balochistan and the North West Frontier Province. The party helped spawn the Taliban in 1994.

"Taliban decision-making and its logistics are all inside Pakistan," said the Afghan defense minister, General Rahim Wardak.

A post-battle intelligence report compiled by Nato and Afghan forces involved in Operation Medusa demonstrates the logistical capability of the Taliban.

During the battle the Taliban fired an estimated 400,000 rounds of ammunition, 2,000 rocket-propelled grenades and 1,000 mortar shells, which slowly arrived in Panjwai from Quetta over the spring months. Ammunition dumps unearthed after the battle showed that the Taliban had stocked over one million rounds in Panjwai.

In Panjwai the Taliban had also established a training camp to teach guerrillas how to penetrate Kandahar, a separate camp to train suicide bombers and a full surgical field hospital. Nato estimated the cost of Taliban ammunition stocks at around £2.6 million. "The Taliban could not have done this on their own without the ISI," said a senior Nato officer.

Gen Musharraf this week admitted that "retired" ISI officers might be involved in aiding the Taliban, the closest he has come to admitting the agency's role.