

Pakistan Crisis 'Hits Army Morale.

Ahmed Rashid, guest journalist and writer on Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia, reflects on mounting political drama and militancy in Pakistan.

BBC NEWS. 06/09/2007

By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore.

Pakistan's worst ever political crisis that has divided the nation also appears to be having a dramatic impact on the morale of Pakistani troops on the Afghan-Pakistan border who are engaged in the "war on terror" and fighting the Taleban.

Talebanisation along Pakistan's border regions has escalated even more rapidly since the political crisis began.

As people flee their villages to escape armed extremists, the state has been unable to protect the population and is rapidly losing credibility and authority.

Moreover, the army's insistence that a pro-Taleban Islamic party once again be part of any future government that may emerge after expected general elections will only lead to a further lessening of state control, an increase in the pace of Talebanisation and further divisions in the nation.

'Terrorism Central'

The surrender of an estimated 280 soldiers, including a colonel and nine other officers, on 30 August in South Waziristan to just a few score Taleban fighters who blocked their supply convoy on the road to the main town of Wana shocked the nation.

The Pakistani Taleban, ostensibly belonging to the group led by Baitullah Mahsud, persuaded the troops to surrender without firing a single shot. The group comprised more than a dozen mid-ranking officers, including a colonel.

The militants then split the soldiers into groups and took them into the high mountains as hostages - much as the Afghan Taleban did six weeks earlier near Ghazni to a group of 23 South Koreans who were subsequently freed.

A jirga of tribal elders who met the Pakistani Taleban for two days returned empty handed. The Taleban demanded the release of 10 of their prisoners held by the government and insisted upon all troops leaving the Federally-Administered Tribal Area or Fata, which comprises the seven tribal agencies.

After the hostage-taking, the government arrested 100 Mahsud tribesmen - but was quickly forced to free them in order to appease the militants.

The army attempted to cover up the disaster by making conflicting statements, none of which appeared logical and all of which were contradicted by the militants and local tribal elders.

The government has banned all journalists from the region since 2004 so real information is sparse.

In case anyone doubted the militants' intentions, 10 Frontier Corps paramilitary soldiers and a major were kidnapped in Fata's Mohmand agency on 1 September, while two deadly suicide bombings killed several soldiers in Bajaur agency on the same day.

After a US intelligence estimate in mid-July that South and North Waziristan had become Terrorism Central and were the headquarters for al-Qaeda and the Taleban, President Pervez Musharraf sent 20,000 troops into the region breaking a ceasefire and a troop withdrawal treaty agreement the army had signed with the Pakistani Taleban in 2005.

Widespread anger

The Pakistani Taleban are now demanding the army returns to the status quo.

But that is impossible with the Americans breathing down Gen Musharraf's neck and threatening to attack al-Qaeda hideouts in Fata if the army does not move first. However, that is looking increasingly difficult.

Many of the army and Frontier Corp personnel serving in Fata are Pashtuns, the ethnic group that lives on both sides of the border and from which the Taleban in both countries originate. Pakistani Pashtun soldiers are now loathe to fire upon their fellow Pashtuns.

The last time the army attacked Fata in 2004 more than 700 soldiers were killed and dozens of Pashtun soldiers and Frontier Corp men deserted, while some army helicopter pilots refused to bomb their own fellow citizens. As a result, Gen Musharraf was forced to do a deal with the militants that took the troops out of Fata - much to the chagrin of the American forces based in Afghanistan.

This time the situation is much more serious.

Apart from the Taleban there is widespread public anger against the army which could make the loss of morale amongst the troops much more serious. People have lost faith in the political system and in the army's attempts to concoct a new one.

In such a political vacuum it is only natural that extremism should grow and the Pakistani Taleban face only a modicum of resistance from the military.

Gen Musharraf has failed to convince the general public that the struggle against extremism is not just President Bush's war, but a struggle that all fair-minded Pakistanis must wage.

In the meantime, the army is insisting that Maulana Fazlur Rehman, who leads the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI), be part of any future government, whether it is led by Benazir Bhutto or the ruling Pakistan Muslim League.

The JUI has been the mainstay for the revival of the Taleban in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

With supervision from Pakistan's intelligence services, thousands of JUI-run madrassas in Balochistan and North West Frontier Province have provided shelter to tens of thousands of extremists from both sides of the border.

Wider tragedy

As long as the JUI is a part of any future Pakistani government it is impossible to imagine how that government will be able to move against the Taleban.

Thus, by insisting that the JUI does become part of a future government, the army appears to be directly boosting the fortunes of the Afghan Taleban, even as Pakistani Taleban kidnap or kill Pakistani troops.

This is only part of a wider tragedy that is a result of eight years of military rule when Gen Musharraf appeared to be running with the hares and hunting with the hounds - following a deeply contradictory policy course that has now caught up with him and helped plunge the country into its present chaos.