

Pakistan is in the grip of chaos

BBC News Asia, 25 January 2014

By Ahmed Rashid.

Violence is soaring to new levels in Pakistan, with militants unleashing a wave of deadly attacks - and the government is dithering about what to do, writes guest columnist Ahmed Rashid.

Tuesday 21 January was a fairly normal day in Pakistan. Twenty-nine Shia Muslims were killed by Sunni militants near Quetta in Balochistan province after a suicide bomber rammed a car filled with explosives into the bus they were travelling in. Meanwhile, in Karachi, three Shias were shot dead, in another attack claimed by Sunni extremists.

And on the same day, renowned Urdu writer and professor Asghar Nadeem Syed was wounded by unknown gunmen in Lahore.

Meanwhile three anti-polio vaccinators, including two women, were gunned down in Karachi by Taliban militants - the third such attack in Karachi in a week.

Meanwhile, the army claimed it had killed 40 militants in a bombing raid that was itself retaliation for a suicide attack near army headquarters in Rawalpindi the day before. That attack left 13 people, including eight soldiers, dead.

A day earlier, 20 soldiers were killed in a bomb attack on an army convoy in the north-west of the country.

That attempted army show of force only encouraged further attacks by the Taliban, who killed 12 security personnel in different incidents on 22 January.

The violence is unsparing, unprecedented and reaching frightening proportions.

There has been a flight of capital in recent months and many of the elite are sending their children out of the country.

For months, Nawaz Sharif's government has had a fruitless policy of wanting to negotiate with the militants, but that has made no headway and now lies in a shambles.

Yet Mr Sharif appears paralysed, with no sense of urgency over tackling the crisis, which would entail abandoning the false hope of talks and giving the army orders to go after the extremists.

Since he came to power last June, Mr Sharif has moved very slowly on his entire promised agenda of economic reform, making peace with India, encouraging reconciliation in Afghanistan and countering militancy at home. He appears overweight and ill, and many people fear he has given up.

Strains between the army and the civilian government are multiplying - with the army now extremely frustrated at the government's policy paralysis while its soldiers die in unprecedented numbers.

However, neither the army nor the government have shown any signs of adopting a zero-tolerance approach to terrorism, which would mean going after all terrorist groups, including those Punjabi groups who fight against Indian rule in Kashmir.

Yet the militants are gaining ground every day by demoralising the public and the security forces with their persistent attacks.

Pakistani Taliban attacks on military personnel and civilians now include mass bombings of mosques, churches and bazaars. And in recent months the Taliban have become adept at targeted killings of politicians, bureaucrats and senior officials in the army and police, too, using suicide bombers, gunmen on motorbikes or mines laid in the road.

Meanwhile the Sunni extremist group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, whose leaders live openly in Punjab but have not been arrested, is carrying out a virtual genocidal campaign against Shias across the country.

The anti-Shia campaign is now nationwide and affecting every city and province, including Punjab, which was considered safe until recently.

"Militant groups... operate with virtual impunity across Pakistan as law enforcement officials either turn a blind eye or appeal helpless to prevent attacks," said Human Rights Watch in its annual report released on 21 January. The report says that Taliban attacks now amount to war crimes.

So dire is the situation that Bill Gates, whose foundation is helping fund the campaign to make Pakistan polio-free, has suggested suspending that aim because of the violence, with nearly 30 polio vaccinators killed in the past 24 months by the Taliban. "The Pakistan violence is evil," Mr Gates told reporters in New York on 22 January.

It is clear to everyone what needs to be done.

People think Mr Sharif needs to address the nation on TV and describe how dire the situation is. He then needs to rally as many opposition political parties to his side as will join him - and those which do not can be deeply embarrassed by the government and the army for supporting terrorism. Finally, he needs to order the army to clear up the main hub of militancy in North Waziristan.

However, the problem has become more complicated in recent months as Islamic extremists in Karachi, Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan, who were once separate, isolated and operating independently, now appear to have come under the banner of the Movement of Pakistani Taliban. Collectively, they are aiming at toppling the system, defeating the army and imposing a caliphate in the country.

The world has seen the dramatic resurgence of al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria, which has greatly complicated the civil war in Syria. Nobody would have thought that al-Qaeda had the power to conquer cities, but that is exactly what it has done in Iraq with the capture of Falluja and Ramadi.

Similarly, so bad is the security situation in the Pakistani border towns of Peshawar and Quetta, as well as the sea port and trading hub of Karachi, that it may not be far off when an urban area - or part of one - falls into the hands of the Pakistani Taliban.

If the present security situation worsens, the next step for the Taliban is an urban insurrection, while tensions between the military and civilians could lead to a military-led state under emergency or even martial law.