

ARTICLES  
Pashtuns Want An Image Change

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**Since 11 September 2001, Pashtuns feel they have become the most vilified ethnic group in the world.**

They are angry, frustrated and now want to reclaim their identity from being lumped with the Taleban and as perpetrators of terrorism and suicide bombings.

Most Afghan prisoners held by the Americans in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba or at Bagram air base near Kabul are Pashtun.

Those who have emerged from these - and Afghan and Pakistani-run jails are also Pashtun.

So are the thousands of civilian casualties who have been bombed by mistake or carelessness in southern Afghanistan by US and Nato pilots during military operations since 11 September.

US soldiers who knocked down doors and interrogated women, alienating the population, did so largely in the Pashtun south, where American forces have been accused by locals of treating all Pashtuns as the enemy - an association that Nato is now trying to change.

**Around the world we are accused of being terrorists, but tolerance is in our blood** - Mehmood Khan Achakzai, Pashtun politician.

All the 80 dead victims of the Pakistani air force bombing of a madrassa in Bajaur tribal agency in Pakistan in late October were also Pashtun.

The pace of promised development, reconstruction and money spent by Western donors is slowest in Afghanistan's Pashtun south.

Pakistan's Pashtun belt is one of the most deprived regions in the country, even though it holds immense resources and generates nearly 50% of the country's hydro-electric power.

#### Cross-border movement

The tragedy for the Pashtuns has been their association with the Taleban.

The Taleban were a majority Pashtun cross-border movement which, in 1994, enlisted support from Pakistan's 40 million Pashtuns and Afghanistan's 10-12 million Pashtuns.

Their bitter, brutal war against the non-Pashtun former Northern Alliance helped create long-lasting ethnic feuds in Afghanistan.

But it was the Taleban's association with Osama Bin Laden and the protection they gave al-Qaeda after 1996 that first associated the Taleban with terrorism in the eyes of the international community.

Even then many Pashtuns resisted the Taleban.

Among them was Abdul Haq - who was gunned down by the Taleban for leading a revolt in 2001 - and Hamid

Karzai, who is now president of Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, secular and democratic-minded Pashtuns have long resisted the idea that the 3,000-year-old Pashtun culture and language should be Talebanised.

Now, for the first time, hundreds of political leaders and tribal chiefs from the Pashtun tribes inhabiting Pakistan's border with Afghanistan have held a Pashtun Peace Jirga, or tribal council, demanding an end to Taleban violence in both countries.

### Restore traditions

They accused Pakistan's military regime and its intelligence agency, ISI, of giving clandestine support to the Taleban and other extremist groups and demanded an end to it.

Clean-shaven tribal chiefs with large turbans, religious scholars with long scraggly beards and young political activists sat together in a large hall in Peshawar in late November demanding that the peaceful traditions and values of the Pashtun tribes be restored.

"The world is asking 'who are you Pashtuns?'" said Mehmood Khan Achakzai, the leader of a moderate Pashtun party in Balochistan province?

"Around the world we are accused of being terrorists, but tolerance is in our blood - it is taught by our mothers. We do not hate people just because their noses are long or they speak in foreign tongues. We demand all the world respect our values, culture and the dignity of our people," he added.

The jirga was organised by the Awami National Party (ANP) - a democratic, secular Pashtun nationalist party that has been marginalised in the past decade due to its strong criticism of Pakistan's military regime and the wave of Islamic extremism that has flooded the Pashtun tribal belt on both sides of the border.

However, the ANP and other democrats are now regaining popularity because of deepening fears within the tribes about the Taleban enforcing their writ among all Pashtuns.

"The Taleban are not the creation of Pashtun society, but the creation of the Pakistan army," said Afsandiyar Wali, the head of the ANP.

"Pashtuns stand united for peace, but the fire of war is burning our land and we have to find the means to extinguish it. We are caught in the middle of warmongers, extremists and militants," he added.

The Jirga also heard from Taleban supporters such as Maulana Fazlur Rehman, a cleric who heads the radical Jamiat-e-Ullema Islam party that is presently ruling the two border provinces of Balochistan and the North West Frontier and openly aids the Taleban insurgency in Afghanistan.

### Drowned out

Rehman claimed that the Taleban were resisting foreign occupation and aggression.

But for the first time, such appeals to violence by a Pashtun mullah were drowned out by voices which said that the Taleban were a threat to peace and a total negation of Pashtun values.

Part of the problem is the army and the ISI.

Before 11 September, when Pakistan openly supported the Taleban, the intelligence services (ISI) literally re-wrote Afghan history.

The Taleban were largely illiterate, but a special ISI cell wrote articles and books, and paid for seminars in an

attempt to show that the extremism of the Taleban was part-and-parcel of Pashtun identity.

Afghan Pashtuns such as Mr Karzai, Abdul Haq and former King Zahir Shah resisted this, but they were voices without access to the Pakistani media.

Pakistani Pashtuns who resisted this labelling were called traitors and anti-national by the ISI.

Now democratic Pashtuns say that in recent statements, President Pervez Musharraf is also trying to demonise Pashtuns.

"Musharraf is describing us as barbarians who shed blood and that the Pashtun are violent," Mr Achakzai told the jirga.

Much of the debate focused on defining the two traditional centres of Pashtun values - the masjid, or mosque, and the hujra, or the seat of the tribal chief.

In other words, the power of religion and secular political power.

While clerics defended the Taleban saying they had united the two, others insisted they must be kept separate if the Pashtuns were to survive as a nation.

The debate on Pashtun identity has just begun and it will be further enhanced when a grand Pashtun jirga is held among both the Pakistani and Afghan Pashtun tribes next spring.