

Taliban Shop In Pakistan For Guns To Fuel War

Tribes on the Afghan border are giving fighters sanctuary, reports Ahmed Rashid in Gulanai

Daily Telegraph- 03/09/2003

Just a few miles from the Afghan border in Pakistan's Mohmand tribal agency, Haji Ahmed Khan stocks everything a Taliban or al-Qa'eda fighter might want.

His shop in Gulanai is packed to the rafters with Chinese-made Kalashnikovs for as little as £150, pallets of ammunition, sleeping bags, water bottles and flak jackets.

The Taliban's [renewed offensive in Afghanistan](#) is being fuelled by fighters, arms, money and logistical support from Pakistan's border areas of North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan.

Pathan tribesmen there are overwhelmingly opposed to the presence of American forces in Pakistan and Afghanistan and [deeply sympathetic to the Taliban](#), who are fellow Pathans.

That sense of Pathan brotherhood is even stronger in the seven federally administered tribal agencies which run north to south in a 750-mile-long wedge between Afghanistan and the settled areas of the North West Frontier Province.

The agencies are under the control of Pakistan, but the tribes have been semi-autonomous since the British Raj. They have always carried arms and sold arms to everyone in the region, from Tamil Tigers and Kashmiri militants to the Taliban.

"The Taliban are clean, honest, believe in Islam and will rout the Americans," said Shakirullah, another shopkeeper in Mohmand. "Anyone fighting the Americans is our friend."

Isolated from mainstream Pakistan and the media, misinformation is rampant. In dozens of interviews it is clear that the people of Mohmand still refuse to accept that al-Qa'eda carried out the September 11 attacks. They believe they were carried out by "the CIA and the Jews".

Most also believe that the Americans hate all Pathans. "Bush has said many times that all Pathans are evil because the Taliban are Pathan," said Haji Baram Khan, the owner of a hotel and shop in the town. In fact President George W Bush has never criticised the Pathans.

After the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Pakistani army entered the tribal agencies one by one at the request of American forces, who are patrolling on the Afghan side of the border looking for al-Qa'eda units.

In August, at the behest of the Americans, thousands of [Pakistani troops occupied the Mohmand agency](#) for the first time.

"Pakistani troops are all along the border now and we are co-operating with the US coalition forces in Afghanistan," said Lt Gen Mohammed Ali Jan Orakzai, the corps commander on the north-west frontier.

But the army has not stopped the flow of guns and fighters to the Taliban.

For 10 days, up to 1,000 Taliban have been fighting a similar number of American and Afghan government troops in southern Afghanistan.

Yesterday, the Afghan army launched assaults on Taliban forces which have infiltrated the barren

mountain ranges of Paktia, Zabol and Oruzgan in recent months.

Rather than retreat, the Taliban are pouring in more recruits from Pakistan to take on the Americans, who are trying to beat them back with heavy air bombardment.

About 300 Taliban reinforcements, led by Anmir Khan Muttaqi, the former education minister, pushed across the Pakistan border into Afghanistan overnight, a senior commander said.

The Taliban are striking at Afghan and American positions all along the border. Three Americans, 20 Afghans and 100 Taliban have died in the heaviest fighting in the past two years.

A group of US special forces soldiers is believed to be operating in the Mohmand agency, but they are holed up in safe houses provided by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and rarely venture out.