

'No quick fixes' for Pakistan Taliban violence

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[Ahmed Rashid.](#)

Pakistan's government has accused the US of deliberately destroying the chances of peace by killing Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud in a drone strike on 1 November. Guest columnist Ahmed Rashid argues that in reality there never were and never will be any speedy solutions to bring the conflict to an end.

Hakimullah Mehsud was not a conduit for peace, regardless of Pakistani government claims.

It must not be forgotten that his roadside bombs killed hundreds of soldiers and civilians, or that he ordered suicide attacks inside churches and mosques - at one point even attacking a bazaar popular among women and children.

For Pakistanis and the international community, disgusted by the wanton killings and nationwide insecurity, Islamabad seemed to be immersed in a twisted logic which attempted to create a narrative for all Pakistanis that has only further confused, divided and polarised the political landscape and would in the future encourage further militancy.

Although the government claims that Hakimullah Mehsud's death has "derailed the peace process", it was highly unlikely that the Pakistani Taliban were ready for talks.

'Extreme line'

On the day that the militant leader was killed, Taliban spokesman Shahidullah Shahid said that nobody from the government had contacted them.

"The government is making announcements only by media, no peace talks have yet been started," Mr Shahid said. The government's idea of talks seemed to be different from the ideas of the Pakistani Taliban.

Moreover, many Pakistanis ask what there is to talk about.

The Taliban have insisted on the state dismantling its institutions and implementing a Sharia legal system and a Muslim caliphate. As such it has nothing to offer the state in talks, while the government cannot concede anything on the constitution or democracy.

Imran Khan, the leader of the political party that now rules the north-western province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), is now threatening to shut the road from the Khyber Pass to Karachi, along which US equipment is being shipped out of Afghanistan in preparation for the withdrawal of US forces next year.

Mr Khan has taken an even more extreme line, denouncing the US and Nato.

He has accused anyone who criticises his views as being pro-American, liberal or even an agent of Western intelligence agencies - which is almost the same rhetoric and accusations used by the extremists.

Improved relations

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has refused to go as far as Mr Khan as he tries to maintain relations with the US.

Perhaps he is more aware than the opposition of the fact that the US has just reopened the desperately needed aid spigot, unlocking \$1.6bn (£1bn) owed to Pakistan from two years ago and promising another \$1bn in aid projects this year.

Moreover, the US has helped facilitate the \$6.7bn IMF loan to Pakistan which is vital if a Pakistani default on its debt is to be staved off.

About one third of the KP provincial development budget - the province governed by Mr Khan's PTI party - comes from US aid.

Equally important is the fact that Mr Sharif has just visited the US, where it seemed that he and President

Barack Obama had improved relations which have been virtually non-existent for the past few years.

Washington's main aim is to keep the road to Karachi open so that it can ship out the bulk of its equipment by next summer - although it has alternative routes to do so via Central Asia. The more expensive military gear is already being flown out from Mazar-e-Sharif.

This highlights another flaw in Imran Khan's logic. He has long campaigned for the US to pull out of Afghanistan, but is now trying to muster support to close the very road along which the US is finally withdrawing.

It is such contradictions that are alienating Pakistan from regional countries, its allies and the West.

One Western envoy in Islamabad said his colleagues were now "totally exasperated" by Pakistani politicians and their constant changes of policy and lack of coherence in fighting terrorism.

"We can detect nothing logical that actually serves Pakistan's interests," the envoy said.

So what next?

It is unlikely that Mr Khan will be able to close the road as the provincial government does not have the powers to do so - and there will be pressure from the government and the army not to.

The former cricketer, meanwhile, shows no sign in changing his stance on wanting talks with the Taliban, even as the new leadership is expected to launch a series of revenge killings for Hakimullah Mehsud's death in which more civilians are likely to die.

Yet on 5 November Mr Khan and other opposition leaders urged the government to continue efforts to talk to the Taliban.

It can only be hoped that the Sharif government will take a more reasonable line and stall the talks for the time being.

This will be especially important because Taliban revenge killings are likely to be followed by what is expected to be a fresh bout of killings of Shias by Sunni extremists during the Shia holy month of Muharram.

Sectarian killings have already started. On the first day of Muharram, 5 November, seven Shias including two doctors were gunned down in targeted killings in Karachi by Sunni extremists.

The government and the army desperately needs to devise a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy that must include the use of force, talks with selected militant groups, economic development and the spread of education.

There also needs to be a central counter-terrorism secretariat where both the army and the civilians can forge a common policy.

Instead there is a persistent belief, which the government is doing nothing to dispel, that a quick fix - in this case talks with the Taliban - will end a conflict that has raged for a decade and that took root in Pakistan in the late 1970s.

There are no quick fixes in countering a murderous terrorism campaign, only a long drawn-out battle that the government should be preparing for.