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The Taliban get their first wish

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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KARACHI - Many Muslims believe that ancient Khorasan - which covers parts of modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan - is the promised land from where they will secure the first victory in the end-of-time battle in which the final round, according to their beliefs, will be fought in Bilad-i-Sham (Palestine-Lebanon-Syria).

The geographical borders of Bilad-i-Sham-Khorasan extend from Samarkand in Uzbekistan to the small Malakand division in the northern fringe of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) that includes the militant-dominated Swat Valley.

On Monday, at a time when United States Central Command chief General David Petraeus was trying to set up a supply route for troops in Afghanistan through Uzbekistan, in this extreme corner of the promised land of Khorasan - Malakand division - militants had every reason to celebrate.

Asif Ali Zardari, the strongly American-backed Pakistani president, and the provincial government of NWFP gave in to the demands of militants and announced a ceasefire, lifted a two-year-old curfew and announced the implementation of Islamic sharia law.

"All un-Islamic laws in the Malakand division of Swat, which is geographically one third of the whole [NWFP] province, have been abolished," the chief minister of NWFP, Amir Haider Khan Hoti, told the media after reaching an agreement with the Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat-i-Mohammadi, which is headed by Sufi Mohammad, the symbol of the sharia movement in Malakand division. The Islamic judicial system will be enforced by Islamic judges - *qazi*.

The accord is a significant victory for the Pakistan Taliban and could end two years of strife in the region which has seen militants pitted against Pakistani security forces.

The peace agreement will be complemented by a compensation package for the families of those killed and injured in the military operations. "[Families] of those who were killed will

get 300,000 rupees [US\$3,760] and those who were wounded will get 100,000 rupees," Hoti said. "The entire deal, Islamic laws and other packages related to the deal were completely approved by the president of Pakistan," he said.

"We have established a task force which will monitor the implementation of Islamic law, but enforcement will be bound by peace and the writ of the state," said Hoti. "The security forces now [after the signing of the agreement] will be in reactive rather than proactive mode. They will only retaliate if somebody tries to challenge the writ of the state," Hoti said.

The army's Inter-Services Public Relations confirmed that the curfew has been lifted, after two years, in Swat Valley. Militants have also announced a ceasefire for 10 days which is likely to extend for an indefinite period.

The developments in Malakand division coincide with the arrival in Afghanistan of close to 3,000 American soldiers as part of an extra 30,000 to boost the already 30,000 US troops in the country. The new contingent will be deployed in Logar province to secure violent provinces near the capital Kabul. Petraeus must now be thinking of how many more troops he will need to confront the additional Taliban fighters that will come from Malakand.

Taliban's victory: A curtain raiser to the spring battle

A key factor in the Taliban's revival after being driven from power by US-led forces in 2001 was that from 2004 they established a strong network in Pakistan that was coordinated by al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri.

A focal point of this was the radical Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad, which was stormed in July 2007 by Pakistani security forces to clear it of militants. The network extended into the Swat Valley, streamed into Bajaur Agency and Mohmand Agency from where militants fed the Afghan insurgency in Kunar and Nooristan provinces.

Other flows of militants into South Waziristan and North Waziristan, Kurram Agency and Khyber Agency respectively fed the Afghan insurgency in the provinces of Paktia, Paktika, Khost and Nangarhar provinces.

By this time, Western intelligence had realized that these developments in Pakistan were a major factor behind the "fireworks" in Afghanistan, and Islamabad was told as much. The Pakistanis were also warned that the militants could also launch a revolution in Pakistan. This was a major turning point in the "war on terror" in the South Asian theater.

For the first time, Islamabad felt a chill up its spine and viewed the situation from a different perspective - not as an American war in which its participation was drawn out of compulsion, but as a war necessary to maintain the status quo of its own system. This system was a blend of the country's deep relationship with the US and the perpetuation of the military oligarchy, combined with a particular brand of Islam that could co-exist with this setup.

The attack on the Lal Masjid was the first shot fired in this battle, and its reverberations soon spread to the Swat Valley, South Waziristan and then Bajaur Agency, in effect turning the whole of NWFP into a war theater. A series of military operations in the tribal areas drove the militants from stand-alone sanctuaries into population centers.

In Malakand, which includes the Swat area, the militants are a part of the Pakistan Tehrik-i-

Taliban and the vanguard of the Taliban's cause in the region against Western occupation forces in Afghanistan and their ally - Pakistan. They have established their own writ with a parallel system that includes courts, police and even a electric power-distribution network and road construction, and all this is now official in the eyes of Islamabad.

All intelligence indicated that further concentration on military operations in Swat could lead to an expansion of the war theater into Pakistan's non-Pashtun cities, such as Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. The security forces were already stretched and even faced rebellions.

These combined factors culminated in Monday's peace agreement, which is a major defeat for Washington as well as Pakistan, and it could also lead to a major setback for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Afghanistan come spring when hordes of better-trained fighters from Swat pour into Afghanistan.

The Taliban defeat American interests

To tame the militancy, Washington and London devised a plan in 2007, one aspect of which was for the military to take on the militants. At the same time, Pakistan was to move from a military dictatorship under president general Pervez Musharraf to a political government.

This happened in the beginning of last year with the formation of a democratically elected coalition government of secular and liberal parties involving among others the Pakistan People's Party, the Muttehida Quami Movement, the Pashtun sub-nationalist Awami National Party (ANP), the Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam and the Pakistan Muslim League-Qaid-i-Azam. It was envisaged that these parties would fully back the US's "war on terror".

Earlier, Washington had brokered a deal between former premier Benazir Bhutto and Musharraf, who was also chief of army staff, under which a National Reconciliation Ordinance was enacted to have all corruption cases against Bhutto and her spouse Asif Ali Zardari dropped. Under this arrangement, later, NWFP was handed over to the ANP, recognized as the most genuine secular political party.

The militants were onto the game. The first shot was the assassination of Bhutto by al-Qaeda in December 2007, which practically turned the whole American plan on its head and created a situation in which Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, an anti-Musharraf party, secured an unprecedented number of seats in parliament, leaving no option but for Musharraf, the most important American ally, to resign. But in time, the secular and liberal political parties in the capital became hostage to the militants.

Another setback for the pro-American forces was the brazen militant attack late last year on Asfandiyar Wali, the leader of the ANP, at his home about 20 kilometers from the NWFP capital, Peshawar. He then fled first to Islamabad and later to Europe. Asfandiyar had been groomed by the US through many visits to the US.

Asfandiyar's departure resulted in half the leadership of the ANP, including the head of their foreign relations committee, Dr Himayun Khan, resigning. Their departure was hastened by dire threats from the Taliban. It was only a matter of time before the ANP's influence in NWFP was severely eroded.

Ironically, the ANP, which sided with the Soviets against the Islamic Afghan resistance in the

1980s and put up fierce resistance to the enactment of Islamic laws in the country, has now become the main engine for the enforcement of sharia in NWFP where it technically rules.

On Tuesday, while Asfandyar has chosen to remain silent, his nephew and the chief minister of the province, Hoti, warned the federal government that any obstruction of the deal with the militants would be unacceptable.

Meanwhile, all schools in Swat, including girls' schools, were opened on Tuesday and thousands of people flocked to a cricket stadium to greet Sufi Mohammad, who will soon travel to Matta, a sub-district of Swat, to visit his son-in-law Mullah Fazlullah to try to persuade him to end the insurgency. For the first time in many months, all members of the provincial and federal parliament will visit the Swat Valley.

Pakistan's failure: How it tackled the militancy

During Musharraf's eight years in power, Pakistan was on board with both the US and Saudi Arabia over the "war on terror". This ensured that Pakistan received a steady supply of all sorts of resources, including deferment on oil payments from Saudi Arabia and special aid packages when Pakistan was badly hit by an earthquake in 2005. Washington mostly looked after Pakistan's military aid packages and reimbursement of expenses incurred in the "war on terror".

A few steps taken by Zardari, however, crumbled the setup like a house of cards. Immediately after taking over as president last September, in a very high-handed manner, Pakistan withdrew the hunting privileges of two Saudi princes located in the district of Dera Ghazi Khan in southern Punjab. To add salt to the wound, the facility was given to a rival sheikh from the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The action was taken at a time when Pakistan badly needed Saudi oil on deferred terms due to soaring prices, and the UAE was in no position to fill the gap. Islamabad now enjoys very good relations with the UAE - which is unable to help Pakistan - due to the family friendship between the Bhutto family and the UAE's rulers. But Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia and its two major allies - Qatar and Bahrain - are at an all-time low because of the insult to the Saudi royal family. (The issue of Zardari's Shi'ite background is a secondary factor.)

Asia Times Online has learned that the newly installed US envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, was impressed in recent talks with the government to learn that chief of army staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani works fully in coordination with the political government and does not intervene in its affairs. The Swat operation is an example: the military immediately stopped action when the government announced the peace deal with the militants. All the same, the Pentagon will be waiting to receive Kiani in Washington soon to discuss why the Pakistan army failed in Swat.

However, Holbrooke was apparently concerned when he interacted with Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gillani and members of the cabinet. Gillani expressed his fears that the poor economic situation in Pakistan could hamper its efforts in the "war on terror".

Holbrooke is said to have asked the premier how much money he would need to revive the economy. "As much as we can get," the premier replied, without giving specifics.

The dynamics of the region have changed once again. Nizam-i-Adal Regulation 2009, which proclaims the enforcement of sharia law in Malakand division, is indeed a written document of Pakistan's defeat in the American-inspired war in NWFP.