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## Taliban may be down but certainly not out

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**Insurgency remains a threat despite recent gains as militants retain the ability to strike back almost at will**

Peshawar : Pakistan's unprecedented crackdown on its homegrown Taliban may have weakened the militants but the insurgency is still a threat to the unpopular US-backed government.

The stakes are high and nuclear-armed Pakistan is being pulled in several directions. Washington wants the Pakistani military to hunt down Afghan Taliban groups crossing over the border to attack US troops in Afghanistan.

Stretched out

But Pakistan is already stretched against its own militants, who have a history of bouncing back and have started to carry out suicide bombings again after a relatively quiet period.

"It seems to me that this is a tactical retreat and the structure and the militant network still exists," said Khadim Husain, a researcher with the private Arayana Institute for Regional Research and Advocacy.

"There is a relative lull in militant attacks but there is a question mark about how long this lull will last."

The battle is draining Pakistan's sluggish economy, already battered by chronic power cuts and starved of foreign investment.

Pakistani officials are boasting of major successes, despite the fact militants have demonstrated they will attack all kinds of targets — from a volleyball game to the headquarters of the powerful military — to destabilise the state. "We have shaken them, they are running helter-skelter. They are on the run," said Fiaz Toru, a top home ministry official in North West Frontier Province (NWFP), home to most militants.

But officials acknowledge the Taliban often melt away during offensives, sometimes returning to areas taken over by the state. They fled the assault in South Waziristan, for instance, and regrouped in other ethnic Pashtun tribal areas such as North Waziristan.

It's a familiar pattern.

The army launched an offensive a year ago to clear Taliban fighters out of Swat Valley, from where the militants had pushed out towards the capital, Islamabad.

#### Public support

Luckily for Pakistan's military, the public started backing the state in the battle. This was because they were angered by the Taliban's austere version of Islamic rule involving public executions and whippings for those deemed immoral.

But the Swat crackdown also raised concerns that militants would simply flee to Mansehra district, just to the east.

Deep down, Pakistani officials may not be as confident as their boasts suggest, even in Peshawar, a key city on the road to Afghanistan where security has been tightened and security checkpoints abound.

"We have made Peshawar comparatively peaceful but our main concern is now that they may be running sleeper cells in southern and eastern districts of the province," said a senior security official involved in the anti-Taliban crackdown.

A new push by the Taliban, which staged a suicide bombing that killed 13 people at a police intelligence office in eastern Lahore city on Wednesday, would renew pressure on weak President Asif Ali Zardari, who can't afford new crises.

Such a push may not be possible for now. Hundreds of police and army troops have died in the fight against the Pakistani Taliban in the past year or so.

"We can't afford to do things in a hurry. We have to move at our own pace. While we are consolidating our gains in South Waziristan and Swat we can't afford to go to North Waziristan right away," said a senior security official.

