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The war on Pakistan's Taliban

Stalking Baitullah Mehsud

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IT was a rare success for Pakistan's police. At dawn on March 30th, a group of grenade-hurling, Kalashnikov-wielding terrorists, some in police uniform, stormed a police training centre in a rural suburb of Lahore, seizing the compound with over 800 cadets. By 4pm, it was all over. Four terrorists were killed or blew themselves up. Three were captured. The police fired wildly in the air before cameras as the captives were whisked away.

Less than a month before, a similar group had brazenly attacked a bus carrying the Sri Lankan national cricket team in Lahore. After that bloody episode, in which all the terrorists escaped leaving eight policemen dead and a couple of cricketers wounded, many pointed the finger of blame at India, with which Pakistan has been locked in conflict since 1947. This time, the de facto interior minister, Rehman Malik, looked elsewhere. "Their footprints lead to Waziristan," he said—referring to Baitullah Mehsud, a jihadist warlord who maintains a fief in that north-western region on the border with Afghanistan.

Mr Mehsud leads a loose coalition of warlords and militias known as the Tehreek i Taliban Pakistan, or the Pakistan Taliban. He has been blamed for many recent terrorist attacks, including the assassination in Rawalpindi in December 2007 of Benazir Bhutto, a two-time former prime minister. He has since expanded his Pushtun-dominated network to include jihadist groups from Pakistan's Punjab province, including one or two disgruntled outfits who had previously fought as proxies of Pakistan's army in Indian-held Kashmir.

Al-Qaeda has also found a refuge in Mr Mehsud's borderland fief, which America has peppered with missile strikes. Last week, America put a \$5m bounty on Mr Mehsud's head and, in vain, dispatched its missiles to kill him.

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Mr Mehsud is unabashed. He called the BBC from his hideout to declare that “by the grace of Allah Almighty, I am claiming responsibility for the attack on the police training school in Lahore with eagerness, honour and love and will continue similar strikes across the country if the US drones are not stopped from killing innocent people in the tribal areas.” Now it remains for America to stop him. Pakistan’s army seems unable to do so. In private, it says it has been asking America to kill him for months. Yet officially it objects to America’s missile strikes and, in Waziristan itself, it is observing an on-off ceasefire agreement with him.