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## ISI hand in Taliban's free-run in Pakistan's Baluchistan: Report

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NEW YORK - Taliban has been given a free-run in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province bordering Afghanistan and its hardscrabble capital city of Quetta, which has been declared off-limits by Pakistani military to US predator strikes.

The outfit's military chief Mulla Abdul Qayyum Zakir , ranked number two after Mullah Omar, and his men are operating with impunity in the high-desert landscape and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) seems to be giving them a free hand, 'Newsweek' reported.

"They are coming and going in groups without end," says a senior Quetta politician, an ethnic Pashtun.

"Whatever the Taliban is doing is supervised and monitored by the [Pakistani] intelligence agencies", he said.

Old hands among the insurgents say it reminds them of 1980s Peshawar, where anti-Soviet mujahedin operated openly with the ISI's blessing and backing, the magazine reported.

The free rein to the Taliban fighters, the magazine said comes at a time when the terror outfit is planning its biggest surge- Operation Badr, the spring offensive in Afghanistan, where it is hoping to push in every single cadre.

The magazine however said that the Taliban preparations were overshadowed by the America's commando assault which felled the al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden.

The assault has left Taliban cadres and commanders stunned, despondent and uncharacteristically worried, 'Newsweek' quoted Zabihullah, a senior Taliban adviser. "It conveys a message to all Taliban leaders that no one is safe".

The new Taliban military chief 38-year-old Zakir, a former Guantanamo inmate who was released to Afghan authorities holds eight to ten meetings a day in Quetta's teeming, impoverished ethnic-Pashtun neighbourhood trailed by half-a-dozen aides on motorcycles.

'Newsweek' said, thousands of Taliban slogans cover the walls in and around the dusty frontier town of Kuchlak, some 14 kilometres northwest of Quetta. "The Only Solution Is Jihad Against the Invaders," says one. "Mullah Omar Is a Dagger Raised to Strike Each Occupier," says another.

A local government councillor says the area's mosques and madrassas are packed with insurgents in need of temporary lodging as they head back to Afghanistan. Way stations have been set up all over the region in rented houses, he says, and swarms of Taliban pass through town on motorbikes every day. Most carry Pakistani national identity cards. "They're enjoying the hospitality of the 'black legs' [derogatory slang for the ISI]," he says. He worries that the local culture is being Talibanized.

At least 20 local madrassa students have disappeared, most likely to join the fight in Afghanistan, he says, and Taliban backers are even trying to stop the traditional music and dancing at weddings. "How can you sing and dance when we're dying?" they tell us."

A senior intelligence officer says he's heard that Mullah Omar considers this year an important test for Zakir. "Our emir is giving Zakir a chance to prove himself," he says. "If he does well, he stays; if not, there are others who can take over."

Of course, no one has seen Omar since he fled into the mountains on the back of Baradar's motorcycle nearly 10 years ago. And Zakir might do well to remember what happened to Osama bin Laden.