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Reuters

Pakistan militant group vows to escalate fight in Afghanistan

By Saud Mehsud and Kamran Haider

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DERA ISMAIL KHAN/ISLAMABAD - One of Pakistan's most powerful militant groups plans to step up its fight against American troops in neighbouring Afghanistan in response to intensified U.S. drone missile strikes on its territory, two of its commanders said Wednesday.

The Central Intelligence Agency has been pounding an area of South Waziristan along the Afghan border controlled by Maulvi Nazir, one of Pakistan's most influential militant leaders.

Since Friday, at least 34 militants have been killed in four drone strikes, intelligence officials say, possibly launched because high value al Qaeda or Taliban figures were spotted.

An escalation by Nazir's men in Afghanistan could complicate the United State's efforts to pacify the country as it starts a gradual troop withdrawal in July.

"Because the United States is launching these strikes we will send more fighters to Afghanistan and step up our operations against U.S. forces," Maulvi Younus, one of Nazir's senior commanders, told Reuters.

"We have no other option. We have no weapons which shoot them (drone aircraft) down so we will fight the United States in Afghanistan."

Defence Secretary Robert Gates has said there could be political talks with the Afghan Taliban by the end of this year, if the U.S.-led NATO alliance continued to make military gains on the ground, putting pressure on the insurgents.

Pakistan, which the United States wants to act more decisively to help its war on militancy, has no strategic reason to attack Nazir and his fighters.

They are among the so-called "good Taliban" militants not opposed to the Pakistani state who focus on trying to defeat U.S.-led NATO and Afghan forces across the border.

Pakistan struck a deal with Nazir's men in 2007 under which they would not harbour anti-government militants in exchange for not being targeted when the army started mounting offensives on the Pakistani Taliban, which is close to al Qaeda.

Military officials in Islamabad say the government is building a road for Nazir's fighters so they can avoid moving through an area controlled by rival militants.

Since it was discovered that Osama bin Laden had been living in the country long before he was found, Pakistan has come under mounting U.S. pressure to go after militants who enjoy sanctuaries in Pakistan and cross over to fight in Afghanistan.

Commander Younus called on the Pakistani government to end the drone strikes, but said his group had no intention of breaking the pact.

He declined to say how many fighters Nazir has at his disposal but Pakistani intelligence officials put the figure at about 1,200.

They mainly use rocket-propelled grenades, AK-47 assault rifles, machine-guns and mortars, commanders say.

While the drone strikes have killed high profile militants, they also fuel anti-American sentiment in Pakistan, recipient of billions of dollars in military aid.

The campaign has also enabled militants to recruit more people like relatives of those killed in the strikes, young men who are disillusioned with the state or Pashtun tribesmen with ethnic ties to militants and prescribe to a culture of revenge.

"We have lots of mujahideen (holy warriors). It is not a problem. If drone strikes continue we believe many tribesmen will join us because they (drone strikes) are killing ordinary people," said Qari Yousaf, a close aide to Nazir.

"Our shura (council of commanders) will decide on the appropriate time to send more fighters (to Afghanistan) and how many will go."

When the United States launched its war on militancy after al Qaeda's September 2001 attacks, and toppled Afghanistan's Taliban, many militants fled to Pakistan's tribal areas.

Afghan and Pakistani militants train together in unruly tribal areas, where they plot shootings and suicide bombings.

"We have our own system. We remain in touch with our brothers (the Afghan Taliban). We are sons of this soil. We know how to cross the border and from where," said Yousaf.

Nazir is a low-profile figure who avoids the limelight.

Mahmood Shah, former chief of security in the tribal regions, says Nazir is a force to be reckoned with.

"He is religious, non-egotistical, sincere and very motivated," said Shah. "Even if he decided to fight al Qaeda, he can. That's how determined he is."