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Drone probably killed Taliban leader.

Is Pakistan safer?

By Ben Arnoldy and Issam Ahmed

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New Delhi; and Islamabad, Pakistan – A US drone strike Wednesday probably killed Baitullah Mehsud, a senior Pakistan-based Taliban leader who organized dozens of terror attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. His death may substantially weaken the Taliban insurgency within Pakistan, a country that some US leaders feared was careening toward collapse just a few months ago.

The US had a \$5 million bounty on Mr. Mehsud, who headed the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The group has carried out dozens of suicide attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan alleged he organized the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, though that was one charge he consistently denied.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said his government had evidence that Mehsud is dead. The Associated Press quoted a Taliban commander, Kafayat Ullah, as confirming his death. US officials said reports of his death were probably accurate.

Mehsud grouped together more than a dozen militant factions in 2007 stretching across six of seven tribal agencies in Pakistan's northwest. Among his local fighters are a contingent of Al Qaeda operatives and militant Uzbeks. By the time of his death, one Pakistani intelligence agent estimates he'd stitched together a militant army of more than 10,000.

Aimed to overthrow government

His focus on overthrowing the government of nuclear-armed Pakistan made him of particular concern. He was the first Taliban leader to focus on fighting Pakistan, considering the government in Islamabad "as evil" as the US or Afghan governments, says Zaffar Abbas, acting editor of the English-language daily Dawn.

Many analysts in Pakistan say his death will substantially undermine Taliban operations in the country.

"I think it would be damaging both symbolically and substantively" for the Taliban, says Rifaat Hussein, a security expert at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad. "Symbolically, because he was the one who was a unifying force for the TTP. He was the one who launched this movement," says Mr. Hussein. "And substantively, his killing – if it turns out to be true – will also mean they will have a succession struggle ... that offers an opportunity to the government to take advantage of any split."

Imtiaz Gul, who heads the Center for Research and Security Studies in Islamabad said Mehsud's death "could lead to a decline" in terror attacks inside Pakistan, which have spiked in the past two years.

Mr. Abbas agrees: "We may see some immediate retaliation. But over the long term, we may experience a dip in very organized level of violence against the people." In 2008, there were 62 terror attacks in Pakistan; so far in 2009, there have been 38.

From his base in the tribal region of South Waziristan, Mehsud provided assistance and direction to Maulana Fazlullah, a Taliban leader who overran the settled regions of Swat and Buner.

Potential to splinter militants

To be sure, past killings of top militant leaders in South Waziristan have not brought calm to the terrorist haven. A US missile killed Nek Mohammed, another young militant chief, back in 2004. But Mr. Mohammed was a much smaller fish swimming in less radicalized waters, argues Mr. Gul.

"Now that he is gone most probably, I think the militant movement might once again splinter into regional entities," says Gul. "That makes them vulnerable to greater pressure both by the Pakistani government and the US."

While some say the death of Mehsud would be a big win for Pakistan, the impact on the US fight in Afghanistan is less certain.

The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan "has very, very little to do with the groups in Waziristan," says Roshtam Shah Mohmand, a former chief secretary for the Northwest Frontier Province.

But he and other analysts say the drone strike could give the US leverage in its effort to convince Afghanistan to go after domestic groups that have focused on the Afghanistan fight.