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## Taliban kidnap 40 Pak boys in Afghanistan

*\* Officials say the boys were trekking when they ended up in Afghanistan*

*\* About 20 boys below 10 years old released*

PESHAWAR: Suspected Taliban militants in Afghanistan have kidnapped as many as 40 Pakistani boys after they inadvertently strayed across the border, Pakistani officials said on Friday.

The boys, from the town of Mamoun in the Pashtun tribal region of Bajaur, were trekking when they ended up in Afghanistan on Wednesday, the officials said.

“Now, they are being held by militants across the border,” Pakistan government official Muhammad Haseeb Khan told Reuters.

It was not possible to verify the claim.

Two local intelligence officials said that the kidnapers were apparently from a militant group allied with Taliban commander Maulvi Faqir Muhammad, who led insurgents in Bajaur but is believed to have fled to Afghanistan in 2010.

“The kidnapers were Taliban militants, belonging to Maulvi Faqir Muhammad group,” one official said, on condition of anonymity.

Another Pakistani administration official speaking anonymously said security forces were stretched thin along parts of the frontier.

“It is a porous border and security cover is not available everywhere,” he said.

Security officials said they learned of the kidnappings when parents of the children, members of a tribe that inhabits the frontier area, informed them of the abductions on Friday.

They said about 20 boys below ten years old in the group were allowed to return to Pakistan, But boys between 12 to 14 years old were held.

About 60 children took part in the outing.

Tribal elders and clerics were trying to negotiate with the militants to secure their release, officials said.

However, Afghan border police commander General Aminullah Amarkhel said he had no knowledge of the abduction, and the local Taliban commander in Kunar province, where the boys vanished, also said he was unaware of the incident.

Afghanistan shares a disputed and unmarked 2,400-kilometre (1,500-mile) border with Pakistan, and Taliban and other al Qaeda-linked militants have carved out strongholds on either side.

Bajaur is opposite the eastern Afghan province of Kunar and has long been an infiltration route for militants entering Afghanistan to fight US-led forces there.

Tribesmen from Mamoun are opposed to al Qaeda and the Taliban and have raised militias to fight them, angering militants who often hit back with bombings and shooting attacks.

The Pakistani military has repeatedly claimed to have eliminated the militant threat in Bajaur, one of seven districts in the semi-autonomous tribal belt that the United States sees as the global headquarters of al Qaeda. agencies