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Reuters

Pakistani Taliban Vow Tough Guerilla War

By Alamgir Bitani

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PESHAWAR, Pakistan (Reuters) - Pakistani Taliban militants vowed to fight a tough, protracted guerrilla war against the army on Tuesday as a suicide car-bomber killed up to 20 people in a northwestern town, police said.

The army went on the offensive in South Waziristan, a lawless ethnic Pashtun region on the Afghan border, on October 17, aiming to root out Pakistani Taliban militants behind a wave of violence in urban areas.

The militants have responded with intensified attacks in towns and cities since the offensive was launched, killing several hundred people.

In the latest attack, a suicide bomber in a car set off explosives in a square in the center of Charsadda, 20 km (12 miles) northeast of the city of Peshawar, killing up to 20 people and wounding at least 30, town police chief Riaz Khan said.

The Waziristan offensive is closely watched by the United States and other powers embroiled in Afghanistan, as the region's rugged landscape of barren mountains, patchy forest and hidden ravines has become a global center of Islamist militancy.

Soldiers have been advancing into the militant heartland from three directions, capturing a string of important bases and entering the Taliban headquarters in the town of Makeen, the army said.

But Taliban spokesman Azam Tariq played down the militants' losses.

"They are capturing roads while our people are still operating in the forests and mountains," Tariq told Reuters by telephone from an undisclosed location.

"We have started guerrilla war against the Pakistani army. We've carried out several actions against the army and inflicted heavy losses on them," he said.

According to army figures, 495 militants have been killed since the offensive began while 48 soldiers have died.

There has been no independent verification of casualties as reporters and other independent observers are not allowed into the war zone except on an occasional trip with the military.

"TOUGHER THAN KASHMIR"

Asked earlier about urban attacks, most of which have been carried out by suicide bombers, Tariq said: "Whoever harms our movement will be given a lesson."

The violence has unsettled trade on Pakistan's stock market and the main index ended 1.95 percent lower at 8,762.40 on very thin turnover of 58.8 million shares.

"There was barely any interest as there is a lot of uncertainty regarding security and the political scenario," said Asad Iqbal, managing director at Ismail Iqbal Securities Ltd.

Tariq vowed a long, tough fight.

"They thought they would capture Waziristan easily but the fight in Waziristan will be tougher than in Kashmir," he said.

Indian security forces have been battling separatist guerrillas in the disputed Muslim-majority Himalayan region of Kashmir since 1989. Tens of thousands of people have been killed.

The military said on Tuesday afternoon nine militants had been killed in the previous 24 hours as soldiers cleared captured villages and secured ridges.

Soldiers found a militant jail near the captured stronghold of Ladha and destroyed some caves, bunkers and observation posts, the army said.