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**AFP**

## War on Al-Qaeda inflames Afghanistan, Pakistan

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After a year of soaring violence and weakening government control in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a US strategy aimed at ending the war against Al-Qaeda ushers in a 2010 fraught with peril.

Violence is at a record high since US-led troops invaded Afghanistan more than eight years ago to unseat the Taliban and destroy Al-Qaeda's sanctuary, now reputed to lie in the border areas of nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has been tarnished by an August re-election mired in massive fraud while the civilian government in Pakistan, once a bright hope for regional stability, is flailing.

President Barack Obama has expanded the war, ordering the deployment of more than 50,000 extra troops to Afghanistan and pressuring Pakistan to do more to fight militants or reportedly risk more drone attacks and special forces raids.

He has narrowed his objectives to denying Al-Qaeda a safe haven, preventing the Taliban from overthrowing the Kabul government, and training Afghan forces and authorities to take responsibility, but the challenge ahead is immense.

Washington has identified the Afghan-Pakistani border as the "epicentre of violent extremism", Al-Qaeda's chief sanctuary, the most dangerous place on earth and the presumed hideout of Osama bin Laden.

The Taliban are said to have a significant presence across much of Afghanistan and commanders warn that more troops will spell more violence at least in the short-term, with NATO and US forces set to rise to 150,000.

In impoverished Afghanistan, civilian casualties were up 24 percent during the first six months of this year compared to the same period in 2008, to 1,013, according to UN statistics.

The independent [icasualties.org](http://icasualties.org) says 506 foreign soldiers have died so far this year in Afghanistan, up 70 percent from 2008 and more than three times the number killed in Iraq in 2009. Related article: [US troop death in Afghanistan doubles](#)

Islamabad, which US officials still suspect of sponsoring Islamist radicals to counter India, has been dragged into a war with Taliban guerrillas whose response to the US-Pakistani alliance has been a 29-month bombing campaign.

Militant attacks in Pakistan have killed more than 1,200 people this year, up 30 percent on 2008, according to an AFP tally.

Strikes are becoming increasingly brazen. In October militants besieged army headquarters for 22 hours while a bombing in a northwestern market that month killed 125 people, mostly civilians, in the deadliest attack in two years.

Scores of troops have died in a string of Pakistani offensives this year against home-grown Taliban in the northwest that have signalled a greater determination to fight those attacking on Pakistani soil.

But rising violence has weakened the US-backed governments in both Kabul and Islamabad.

Fraud marred the August presidential election in Afghanistan, which was intended as a milestone on the road to democracy but ended up with Karzai being declared victor by his officials when his sole rival pulled out.

After months of political paralysis, Karzai has nominated a new cabinet that broadly meets Western hopes for a more transparent line-up that can tackle corruption, sideline warlords and thus boost the president's legitimacy.

The new year will see an international conference in London on January 28 that could set a short time-frame to hand over security to Afghan forces.

The onus is on the UN mission in Afghanistan to overcome disarray after the election debacle as envoy Kai Eide steps down and to prepare for parliamentary and district elections due in 2010.

In Pakistan, President Asif Ali Zardari enters the new year in a precarious position and facing possible court proceedings after the collapse of an amnesty that had protected him and key allies from corruption charges.

His relations with the powerful military are strained, his approval ratings abysmal, and it remains unclear how far he will enact promises to transfer powers to Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and bolster parliament.

Anti-Americanism is being stoked by increased US drone attacks targeting Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders in some of the world's most hostile terrain.

Taliban attacks against the heart of the powerful security establishment have raised questions about the military's capability to crush extremists.

Islamabad is troubled by reports that if it fails to take firmer action, the United States will send special forces into Pakistan to chase the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and will extend drone attacks to territory under direct state control.

In Afghanistan, US plans to start withdrawing troops in 18 months are further fanning uncertainty.

In Pakistan, fears persist that India poses a bigger threat than the Taliban -- an issue little addressed in the West.