

Pakistani insurgents join forces on Afghan border

Unity deal bodes ill for Canadian troops

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ISLAMABAD — Militant groups in Pakistan's wild northwest region have come together in a single organization for the first time, threatening to step up operations against the Pakistan army and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The insurgents have named Baitullah Mehsud, a tribal chief from the Waziristan area, which borders Afghanistan, as their chief, or Emir.

Mr. Mehsud, a charismatic figure in his early 30s with a fearsome reputation, took more than 200 Pakistani soldiers prisoner this year. They were only let go after authorities agreed to release some Taliban prisoners. He is also blamed for organizing a series of suicide-bomb attacks.

The Tehrik Taliban-i-Pakistan was launched after a meeting of 40 Taliban leaders in Waziristan. They came not only from the semi-autonomous tribal belt, known as the Federally Administered Tribal Area, which runs along the Afghan border, but from several “settled” areas of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, including Swat, Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan.

“The sole objective of the meeting was to unite the Taliban against NATO forces in Afghanistan and to wage a defensive jihad against Pakistani forces here,” said Mr. Mehsud's spokesman, Maulvi Omar.

The news is especially troubling for Canadian troops, who are fighting nearby in Afghanistan's Kandahar province.

Pakistani troops have only just managed to expel a band of around 5,000 Taliban warriors who had taken over the valley of Swat, previously known as a holiday destination.

Khalid Aziz, a political consultant based in Peshawar, said that, like the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Pakistani militants were coming together to further their political goals.

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“This is a dual-track strategy: They will use force and also negotiate,” Mr. Aziz said. “It is like an armed political party.”

He said the timing of the Pakistani Taliban's unity move appeared to be linked to the upcoming general election. Pakistan has previously held talks with the militants and come to short-lived peace agreements.

“What we are getting here is the beginning of a separate mini-state which will be run by a FATA warlord but which will take orders from al-Qaeda,” Pakistan's Daily Times newspaper said in an editorial published Sunday. “The sooner we tackle this menace the better.”

The Taliban was originally a Pakistan-backed militia that came up in Afghanistan under Mullah Mohammed Omar. It became powerful enough to seize political power in 1996. It always had strong ethnic and cultural ties to tribesmen in northwest Pakistan, but the FATA's fiercely independent people were always left alone to run their own affairs by the Pakistani state.

After Sept. 11, 2001, when the U.S.-led coalition went to war in Afghanistan, many Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters took refuge across the border in the FATA. The Pakistani tribes turned against the state when, under intense U.S. pressure, Pakistan first turned its back on the Taliban and then sent its army into the tribal belt to fight the extremists there. That has resulted in the development of an indigenous Pakistani version of the Taliban, with close ties to al-Qaeda. However, the various Pakistani tribal militants had only informal links until now.

Mehmood Shah, a former senior civil servant in charge of the FATA, said that the tribes had different traditions and historically always found it difficult to come together, often fighting each other. He said that the Pakistani state must sow discord to ensure that disunity remained – the old colonial game of divide and rule.

“The government must do its job well now,” Mr. Shah said.

Like Mullah Omar, there are almost no photographs of the media-shy Baitullah Mehsud. He runs his own private army, with thousands of warriors, which enforces strict Islamic law in Waziristan. Pakistan has virtually ceded control of Waziristan to the Taliban. Some fear that Taliban control could spread to other parts of the tribal belt and then on to the settled areas of the northwest, resulting in a break-away state run by extremists.

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