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U.S. takes fight to Taliban leader

Raza Khan and Sara A. Carter, THE WASHINGTON TIMES

PESHAWAR, Pakistan | Unmanned aircraft have begun targeting Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud, a shift in strategy by the Obama administration that may reflect efforts to pre-empt a Taliban spring offensive against U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

The U.S. military avoided hitting Mr. Mehsud's forces in 2007 and 2008, during the Bush administration, when the Taliban leader waged a campaign of suicide bombings inside Pakistan and humiliated the Pakistani army in his tribal stronghold near the Afghan border.

However, Mr. Mehsud formed an alliance last month with two other Taliban commanders in North and South Waziristan, a potentially significant development because territory controlled just by Mr. Mehsud does not touch the Afghan border. With the alliance, he now has an inlet to Afghanistan.

Sarfaraz Khan, a professor at the University of Peshawar, traced the new U.S. aggressiveness to the Taliban alliance.

"In order to stop unifying Taliban groups from launching massive attacks against NATO and in particular newly arriving U.S. troops in Afghanistan, such attacks have become indispensable on Americans' part," he said.

On Sunday, two missile strikes suspected to have come from U.S. drones killed up to 12 people and injured scores in a Mehsud stronghold in the South Waziristan tribal zone, a senior Pakistani official in the South Waziristan capital, Wana, told The Washington Times.

The missiles hit a compound in Haibat Khel village within the Sararogha area of South Waziristan. Militants loyal to Mr. Mehsud immediately cordoned off the area.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak for attribution, could not confirm published reports that the dead included four foreign-born militants.

Targeting Mehsud strongholds in South Waziristan represents a shift that began shortly after President Obama took office. A Feb. 14 strike that killed more than 30 people was apparently the first to hit Mr. Mehsud's tribal homeland.

Other attacks on Mehsud followers have been reported in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, including a Feb. 16 drone attack in Kurram. One of Mr. Mehsud's lieutenants, Hakimullah Mehsud, had been put in charge of that region.

CIA Director Leon E. Panetta, when asked last week whether Mr. Mehsud poses a threat to U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, spoke in general terms without mentioning Mr. Mehsud by name.

"Obviously, you know, we have identified those militants and terrorists that constitute a threat not only to U.S. forces and to Americans and people in Afghanistan, but also those that constitute threats to the Pakistanis, and we are working with the Pakistanis to identify those who represent common threats to both of us in our efforts," he told reporters at his first press conference since taking office.

Mr. Panetta also said: "What is important is that we do everything possible to disrupt their leadership and to make sure that they are not able to come together in a way that makes them effective in terms of going after Americans."

Sararogha, where the missiles struck Sunday, is known as the site of a 2005 attempt by the Pakistani government to negotiate a truce with the Taliban.

When Pakistani forces launched an offensive against Mr. Mehsud in 2007 after the truce collapsed, his fighters captured scores of Pakistani troops and ransomed them for militants held in Pakistani jails.

Both Pakistani and U.S. officials have accused Mr. Mehsud of leading the December 2007 assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Mr. Mehsud denied any involvement, and Mrs. Bhutto's followers said later that they doubted Mr. Mehsud was responsible.

During the Bush administration, the apparent immunity of Mr. Mehsud and his forces from U.S. drone attacks prompted a spate of rumors that the militant leader was somehow involved with the Americans.

After Sunday's attack, local tribesmen told The Times that they expect Mr. Mehsud to retaliate by targeting U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Mr. Mehsud is the head of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella organization of Pakistani Taliban, as well as the undeclared leader of the recent alliance known as the Shura Ittehadul Mujahedeen (SIM).

In forming the alliance, militant commanders said they had two goals: fighting U.S. troops in Afghanistan and imposing Shariah law throughout Pakistan's tribal areas.

Syed Alam Mehsud, vice president of the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party in the North West Frontier Province, told The Times that the missile strikes will have a profound impact.

"It seems the Americans have come to realize that after the unification of major Taliban groups and Baitullah being its head, the TTP chief is the real threat and that is why they have started striking his strongholds with missiles from drones," he said.

He added, "I think Baitullah's turn has come. The reason is the anticipated

spring offensive of Taliban to start in April and the arrival of thousands of additional [U.S. troops] in Afghanistan's south."

- Sara A. Carter reported from Washington.