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## Pakistan targets its most wanted man

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

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KARACHI - The Pakistan military, claiming that its eight-week campaign against militants in the Swat area of North-West Frontier Province is in its "final phase", has turned its attention to what United States intelligence describes as the most dangerous nexus in the world.

This is the loose alliance headed by Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud that comprises Punjabi militants, al-Qaeda and the Mehsud tribe based in the South Waziristan tribal area on the border with Afghanistan.

Fighter jets were reported on Monday to have bombed areas believed to be part of Baitullah's stronghold around the town of Makeen in preparation for a ground offensive. Officials said that 11 militants were killed and four wounded.

These are the first shots in a new battle aimed at eradicating what is believed to be al-Qaeda's most secure base. Yet, as the group has shown in the past, the disruption of its bases will not necessarily weaken it - it simply scatters in the form of new cells.

### The rise and rise of Baitullah Mehsud

Baitullah, who has a US\$5 million price on his head from the US and who is accused of being behind a string of terror attacks in Pakistan, including the assassination of former premier Benazir Bhutto in December 2007, started out as a loyal foot soldier of the Taliban after they were defeated in 2001.

Baitullah, now in his mid-30s, was armed and financed by Arab militants who fled to the Pakistani tribal areas after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. Crucially, he hooked up with Qari Tahir Yuldashev, the chief of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, who had a profound influence on Baitullah, inculcating in him anti-state ideology and hardline training. Baitullah was placed in charge of over 2,500 Uzbek fighters who formed the backbone of a militia that soon established a reign of terror in the area.

Having been given this start, the shrewd Baitullah emerged as the most important warlord in

the Pakistani tribal areas, giving him a status almost on a par with Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

In December 2007, Baitullah took over as head of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (Students' Movement of Pakistan), a militant umbrella group primarily in conflict with the central government. Among the group's stated objectives are resistance against the Pakistani army, enforcement of sharia law and jihad against foreign forces in Afghanistan.

Baitullah opened his arms to the scattered leadership of al-Qaeda, Punjabi fighters and any Islamist wanted by the Pakistani security agencies. He drove out tribal elders from his area and then used Mehsud clan members for robberies, kidnappings and acts of terrorism from his backyard to the southern port city of Karachi.

It is the epicenter of this militant network that the Pakistani security forces now want to destroy, and from the perspective of the US, the al-Qaeda element that is a part of it.

Highly secret documents acquired by Asia Times Online concerning Islamabad's operational plans for South Waziristan show that the offensive, unlike the one in Swat, will be limited to neutralizing the military capability of the Tehrik-Taliban Pakistan and destroying al-Qaeda bases and disrupting its networking. That is, it will not go for complete subjugation of the area.

The operation will involve fighter bombers, helicopter gunships, limited artillery and ground troops, including special forces. The top brass realize that all-out engagement is not possible in the hostile terrain where a fully armed hostile population lurks in every nook and cranny.

The military apparatus has tried its level best to stir Baitullah's rivals in South Waziristan. Chief among these was commander Qari Zainuddin Mehsud, who was to assist the military in going after Baitullah.

News reports on Tuesday, though, said that he had been gunned down on Tuesday morning in Dera Ismail Khan, a town in North-West Frontier Province. In the past few months, Zainuddin had been very vocal against Baitullah, saying that his targeting of the Pakistani state was against Islam.

Other key people opposed to Baitullah have adopted a very cautious approach and are unwilling to support the army. These include the number one rival, Mullah Nazir. He is an Ahmadzai Wazir warlord and the biggest Taliban commander in Paktia province in Afghanistan. Another is Gul Bahadur, also a Wazir warlord and the chief of the Taliban in North Waziristan, and there is also the most important commander of the whole region, Sirajuddin Haqqani, considered close to the Pakistani security forces.

On the surface, it appears that tribal differences have been put to one side and that ideology has prevailed. However, there is a deep fear within the rank and file of the militants that if the Pakistani security forces enter the two Waziristans, even under the cover of eliminating Baitullah, there is no guarantee that under US pressure they will not extend the crackdown to all militants.

It is quite possible, therefore, that major rivals, while ostensibly staying neutral, will provide Baitullah and his forces safe passage should the need arise. This has happened before, which

is why networks in South Waziristan have been disrupted, but not destroyed; elimination of one warlord turned out to be the rise of another warlord.

For instance, Nek Mohammad was the iron man of South Waziristan in 2004, before he was killed by a laser-guided missile. This disrupted the jihadi network of the Ahmadzai Wazir tribe and a lull prevailed for a few months.

Then, an ex-Guantanamo Bay prisoner, the one-legged Abdullah Mehsud, rose to prominence and soon grabbed the headlines by kidnapping and killing a Chinese engineer. He was killed in a shootout with security forces in southwestern Balochistan province in June 2005.

Earlier, Haji Omar, a Wazir tribesman and a rival of Baitullah's tribe, became the head of the Taliban in South Waziristan. He was soon deposed by Baitullah, who has become the only warlord with tentacles in all of the seven tribal areas of Pakistan, apart from Malakand Agency. His network also operates in Karachi.

Baitullah has proved to be an exceptional organizer and planner - and deadly. Apart from the killing of Bhutto, he is credited with masterminding the attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore in March, as well as the assassination of anti-Taliban scholar Sarfaraz Naeemi in the same city a few months later, in addition to numerous other acts of terror.

Given Baitullah's stature, it would be difficult to replace him should he indeed fall victim to the military's bullets - in many ways he is the essential glue that holds his network together. The most likely outcome would be the breakup of the network into dozens of small stand-alone cells.

This would not have been possible a few years ago, but today most militants have contact and coordination with other groups, even though they operate independently. For instance, students of a particular radical *madrassa* (Islamic seminary) now have cross-linkages with various militant groups.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence has a dossier - seen by Asia Times Online - on this new phenomenon, with the extensive linkages of more than 1,000 militants carefully detailed.

Al-Qaeda has experienced a similar trend with stand-alone yet connected operatives in numerous countries, from Yemen to Somalia to Iraq. These operators do not need any headquarters to provide approvals, daily guidelines or financial help. Al-Qaeda's ideology and the motivation it provides is their underpinning guideline, that is, being a part of a global resistance against the West in retaliation for the occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Each cell devises its own plans and then seeks help from selected people. These could be a former jihadi associate from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq or elsewhere now living at the area of the planned operation.

A report acquired by Asia Times Online, compiled by a Western agency, identifies such a cell. It is led by Nur al-Din al-Muhajir, a former intelligence officer in Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and now linked to al-Qaeda. Its operations focus on disrupting trade lines off the coast of Somalia. According to the report, Nur is encouraging militants scattered around the area to also target international interests, rather than concentrate on small local targets.

In Pakistan, with the guns about to roar with renewed intensity in South Waziristan, the militants and their al-Qaeda colleagues will be aware of this bigger picture: that a conventional military offensive might work in the short term by causing disruption, but the seeds of resistance will soon sprout again, even if in a far-away land that has been tilled with the fertile al-Qaeda ideology.