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AP News

Militant says Pakistani Taliban stronger than ever

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Pakistan's Taliban movement is stronger than ever despite the killing of its top commander and will stage more suicide attacks if the army launches another offensive against it, a top militant told The Associated Press.

Qari Hussain Mehsud, known for training Taliban suicide bombers, met with an AP reporter Thursday at a secret location in North Waziristan, near the Afghan border, just hours before a U.S. missile strike hit the tribal region and killed 12 people.

The U.S. has launched dozens of missiles to take out top Taliban and al-Qaida leaders in Pakistan's northwest over the past year. Although Pakistan routinely protests the strikes, it is widely believed to secretly cooperate with them.

One such missile strike in August killed Pakistani Taliban chief Baitullah Mehsud, and Qari Hussain Mehsud's comments appeared to be the latest attempt by militants to end speculation of a rift among insurgent commanders following the killing.

"Our movement has gained more strength after the martyrdom of Baitullah Mehsud," he said. "We are united."

The militant commander, who appeared to be in his 40s and had a curly black beard and mustache, was surrounded by dozens of other militants and local residents. At one point, he assured those gathered that Islam allowed suicide bombings.

The AP was given the interview on condition it not reveal the meeting's exact location and wait a day before publishing the remarks.

The commander said he had been appointed the latest spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban's new chief, Hakimullah Mehsud. He also acknowledged that he was leading a group of suicide bombers known as the "Fidayeen-e-Islam," and said the attackers were ready to give their lives if Pakistan proceeds with offensives in the tribal areas.

"We have enough suicide bombers, and they are asking me to let them sacrifice their lives in the name of Islam, but we will send suicide bombers only if the government acts against us," he said.

Pakistan's northwestern region bordering Afghanistan has provided Islamist militants with safe havens from which to plan attacks on U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan. In particular, the mountainous, lawless tribal regions — where the government wields little control — are favored breeding grounds for insurgents, who have also attacked Pakistani government workers and security forces.

Pakistan has launched multiple offensives in its tribal regions and other parts of the northwest to root out the militants. A military statement said Friday that 57 militants surrendered in the Swat Valley over the past 24 hours, and operations led to the arrest of 13 others.

It was supposed to launch an offensive in South Waziristan aimed at taking out Baitullah Mehsud earlier this year. But now the army appears content to keep its operations in that region limited since the U.S. missile strike that felled the Pakistani Taliban chief.

Qari Hussain Mehsud also praised al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden and Afghan Taliban head Mullah Omar as heroes of Islam. Bin Laden is rumored to be hiding in Pakistan's tribal belt, while Omar is believed to be in Quetta, a city in southwest Baluchistan province.

The latest missile strike took place late Thursday in the village of Dande Darpa Khel in North Waziristan, two intelligence officials said on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to reporters on the record.

Twelve people died, though it was unclear who they were. The village is a reputed stronghold of Jalaluddin Haqqani, an insurgent commander blamed for many of the most deadly attacks on U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan.