

British General Pushes For Action On Taliban Sanctuaries

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By Ahmed Rashid in Kabul

Nato's commander in Afghanistan, Lt Gen David Richards, arrived in Islamabad yesterday for urgent talks with Pakistani military and intelligence services to ask what they intend to do about Taliban sanctuaries in their country.

The British general, who leads 31,000 troops, will meet President Pervez Musharraf today and will also seek help on capturing the Taliban leadership operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Before leaving Kabul, Gen Richards painted a dire picture, saying that if reconstruction in the country did not seriously start by the winter, 70 per cent of Afghans could switch sides and join the Taliban. He said he wanted "partnership and co-operation rather than confrontation" with Pakistan.

Key items on the agenda will be the alleged presence of the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar in Quetta, capital of the Pakistan province of Balochistan and the recent peace deal between the Pakistani military and the Taliban in a major tribal area.

His visit coincides with a United Nations report stating that five Taliban command and control centres are running the insurgency and operating with widespread use of "safe havens outside the country".

They include a Taliban command active in Afghanistan's north-eastern provinces, an eastern command and a southern command, as well as separate fronts established by two Taliban allies, the veteran warlords Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani.

Although the UN does not allege that all these fronts are based in Pakistan, Nato and American intelligence place both Haqqani and Hekmatyar as well as Mullah Mohammed Omar in Pakistan.

"The leadership relies heavily on cross-border fighters, many of whom are Afghans drawn from nearby refugee camps and radical seminaries in Pakistan," the UN report says.

"They are trained and paid to serve as medium-level commanders, leading operations inside Afghanistan and are able to retreat back to safe havens outside the country," it adds.

However, the report says: "The foot soldiers of the insurgency are Afghans recruited within Afghanistan."

Gen Richards and the head of US forces in Afghanistan, Lt Gen Karl Eikenberry, told The Daily Telegraph that since the military signed the deal on Sept 5 there had been a 300 per cent surge in terrorist attacks in eastern Afghanistan.

The peace deal was intended to halt attacks on American and Afghan forces.