

Taliban Fighters 'Massacre 300 Shia Muslims'

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By Ahmed Rashid in Islamabad

AT least 300 people were massacred by Taliban forces last month when they re-took a remote area in central Afghanistan inhabited by Shia Muslim Afghans who are opposed to the Sunni Taliban, United Nations officials fear.

Pakistani and Arab extremists were also involved in the massacre, witnesses said. Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General, announced on Jan 19 that "more than 100 people may have been killed, including Afghan humanitarian workers", when the Taliban recaptured Yakawolang, a small town in the Hazarajat region that had been captured a week earlier by the anti-Taliban United Front.

Witnesses who escaped the massacre and were interviewed by UN relief agency officials have spoken of large-scale killings in more than a dozen villages around Yakawolang. The Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, has banned aid workers and journalists from visiting the area. A UN official said: "When the Taliban re-entered the town they lined up every male from 17-70 years old and shot them in the head, including a group of tribal elders who had come out to welcome them."

Yakawolang is now back in the hands of the UF and the Taliban are mobilising a large army to recapture it. Amnesty International has condemned "the summary executions" of the civilians. The witnesses said Pakistani Islamic extremists belonging to virulent anti-Shia groups and Arab militants who are loyal to the wanted Saudi militant Osama bin Laden also took part in the killings.

On Monday a trial began in New York of four associates of Bin Laden accused of bombing two American embassies in Africa. Bin Laden is a guest of the Taliban. Last month tough new UN Security Council sanctions against the Taliban went into force, creating a huge economic and humanitarian crisis inside Afghanistan. At least 200 refugees have died in western Afghanistan due to a lack of shelter and food.

The United Front said that it found mass graves containing the bodies of 43 civilians massacred in Takhar province, in the north-east of Afghanistan, when Taliban soldiers retreated last month.