

## Pashtuns In Pakistan Speak Out Against The Taliban Insurgency In Afghanistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

War weariness is taking root among some Pashtuns in Pakistan. A recent gathering of Pashtun leaders spoke out forcefully for an end to Taliban violence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. They also called on the Pakistani government to cut its alleged ties with the radical Islamic movement.

Hundreds of political leaders and tribal chiefs from the Pashtun tribes inhabiting Pakistan's border with Afghanistan gathered for a peace jirga, or tribal council. Meeting in the Pakistani border city of Peshawar on November 20, jirga participants complained that Pashtun traditional values were "being drowned out in a sea of blood" created by the ongoing Taliban insurgency. There are roughly 12 million Pashtuns living in Afghanistan, and about 40 million in Pakistan.

Clean shaven tribal chiefs with large turbans, religious scholars with long scraggly beards and young political activists all attended the peace jirga, the first of its kind. Many participants challenged the notion that the Taliban enjoys the near-unanimous support of Pashtuns. "The Taliban [is] not the creation of Pashtun society, but the creation of the Pakistan army," Afsandiyar Wali, head of the Awami National Party (ANP), told the jirga. "Pashtuns stand united for peace, but the fire of war is burning our land and we have to find the means to extinguish it. We are caught in the middle of warmongers, extremists and militants." The Pashtun peace jirga was organized by the ANP, a small democratic, secular Pashtun nationalist party that has been marginalized in the past decade due to its strong criticism of Pakistan's military regime, and the wave of Islamic extremism that has flooded the Pashtun tribal belt on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border.

However, the ANP and other democrats are now regaining popularity because of deepening fears within the tribes about growing Talibanization among all Pashtuns, a phenomenon fanned by the war in Afghanistan between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which is backed by US and NATO forces.

The Taliban is predominantly Pashtun and they are recruiting both Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns to fight over 10,000 NATO troops deployed in southern Afghanistan. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. Pakistani Taliban leaders have also declared an Islamic state in North Waziristan, a tribal agency on the Pakistani side.

The jirga also heard from Taliban supporters such as Maulana Fazlur Rehman, a cleric who heads a radical Jamiat-e-Ul-lema Islam party that is presently ruling the two border provinces of Baluchistan and North-West Frontier. Rehman helped launch the Taliban in 1994, and since then his party has provided a permanent sanctuary for Taliban fighters in Pakistan.

"The Taliban are in the forefront of resistance against foreign occupation forces in Afghanistan," said Rehman. "The United Nations has declared them [Taliban militants] terrorists so the only way left to defend themselves is by picking up the gun." Other conservative speakers insisted that foreign forces had to leave Afghanistan. However, such words were drowned out by dozens of speakers who said that the Taliban were a threat to peace and a negation of Pashtun values.

The jirga aimed to dispel the impression that Pashtuns are all involved in terrorism. "The world is asking who are you Pashtuns?" said Mehmood Khan Achakzai, the leader of a moderate Pashtun party in Baluchistan Province. "Around the world, we are accused of being terrorists, but tolerance is in our blood - it is taught by our mothers. We demand all the world respect our values, culture and the dignity of our people."

He and other speakers said that US forces in Afghanistan, as well as President Pervez Musharraf, were attempting to demonize Pashtuns. "Musharraf is describing us as barbarians who shed blood and that the Pashtuns are violent," complained Achakzai.

"The Pashtun nation is a victim of a conspiracy, and we are not terrorists. ... The blood flowing on this border is Pashtun blood, and we will not allow terrorist to use our land," added Darya Khan Afridi, a tribal chief and politician from the Khyber Pass.

Much of the debate focused on defining the two traditional centers of Pashtun values; the "masjid," or mosque, and the "hujra," or the seat of the tribal chief - concepts that can best be described as the power of religion and secular political power. While clerics defended the Taliban saying they had united these two major strands of Pashtun identity, others insisted they had to be kept separate if Pashtuns were to survive as a nation. Several speakers expressed anger at Musharraf for following a two-track policy, both supporting the war on terrorism and the terrorists in the shape of the Taliban. Achakzai described the Taliban "as the tail of the ISI [the Pakistani intelligence agency]." Such harsh criticism of the security establishment is rare in a city that has long been silenced by fears of Taliban retribution. They also came shortly after British Prime Minister Tony Blair gave a ringing endorsement of Musharraf for his role in the war on terror.

Many speakers urged Pakistan to stop interfering in Afghanistan. Humayun Khan, a former Foreign Secretary and a long time Pakistani diplomat said that "Islamabad has perpetrated a bad policy of wanting to bring Afghanistan under Pakistan's influence - we should let the Afghans decide their own future."

Bismallah Kakar, a Pashtun member of the Baluchistan provincial assembly, said Afghans were not being allowed the freedom to govern themselves because of outside interference. "Let's support peace in Afghanistan, not the insurgency," he said.

At the Jirga several tribal chiefs claimed that the Pakistani military was helping the Taliban plan a major new offensive in the spring of 2007, aimed at defeating NATO in southern Afghanistan and toppling the government of President Hamid Karzai. The chiefs said the Taliban are being allowed to move large amounts of weapons and ammunition to the Afghan border. Spring and summer is the traditional fighting season for the Taliban. However government officials in Peshawar vehemently denied the claim. "This is nonsense, Pakistan supports stability in Afghanistan," said a senior military officer.