

## Taliban Mounted Militia Prepares For Border Strike

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By Ahmed Rashid in Kandahar

A Taliban army is mobilizing in Pakistan for an attack into Afghanistan before the start of winter.

Up to 2,500 fighters are in Baluchistan province preparing to cross the border on motorcycles and attack United States and Afghan government forces, according to Western and Afghan intelligence officials.

The Taliban have virtually taken over several suburbs of Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan, and are being supported by Pakistani religious parties, the drugs mafia and al-Qa'eda. There is also reportedly increasing support from the Pakistani authorities - a claim denied in Islamabad.

Yesterday marked the second anniversary of the beginning of the American bombing campaign that destroyed the Taliban after the September 11 attacks. They now plan to harry US forces in Kandahar, where residents feel increasingly under siege, and Zabol.

Since August Taliban attacks have killed almost 400 Afghan soldiers, aid workers and civilians. Four US soldiers have also died.

After evening prayers in Quetta's Pushtunabad suburb, tens of thousands of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban pour on to the streets from mosques and madrassas - the religious seminaries - to take tea, eat ice-cream and plan their raids.

"We have the American forces and the puppet regime of [President Hamid] Karzai on the run. They will collapse soon" said a Taliban mullah in Pushtunabad bazaar.

The Taliban have bought hotels, shops and houses, forcing many frightened local residents to leave. Vehicle dealers say the Taliban have bought 900 motorcycles in the past three months in the Quetta region and another 250 in Loralai. Motorcycle guerrillas roam Afghanistan's rural areas attacking aid agency vehicles and isolated police posts.

Dealers say the Taliban buy in bulk and do not ask for registration papers or receipts. Their favourite machine is the Honda 125.

For communications, they are importing hundreds of satellite telephones from the Arab Gulf states, because those bought in Pakistan are closely monitored by America's Central Intelligence Agency. Arms and ammunition are dumped inside Afghanistan.

Their funding comes from the drugs trade and al-Qa'eda. Osama bin Laden is still in hiding along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

The Taliban are also deeply involved in the heroin trade which last year generated £717 million in Afghanistan - a sum equal to the amount spent on reconstruction aid for the country. Logistical support for the Taliban is available from the hardline mullahs of the Jamiat-e-Ullemah Islam (JUI) - a partner in the ruling coalition that governs Baluchistan.

In recent weeks President Karzai has appealed to JUI mullahs and the Pakistan army to stop the Taliban from organizing in Quetta, but that has only infuriated the JUI.

"The Afghan government and Karzai are the stooges of America and every Muslim and every Afghan knows this," said Maulana Hafiz Hussain Sharodi, Baluchistan's information minister. "Only

the Taliban can constitute the real government in Afghanistan."

According to President Karzai, the headquarters for Taliban planning is the Shaldara madrassa in Quetta run by Maulana Nur Mohammed, who is a JUI member of parliament.

"We are proud that the Taliban are made and helped here," said Maulana Abdul Qadir, the deputy to Nur Mohammed. "Our job is to make sure that the whole Pakistani nation supports the Taliban."

Hundreds of Pakistani Taliban are joining their Afghan brothers, although Pakistan denies that its citizens are involved.

US officials are perturbed at the extent of Pakistani help to the Taliban and Congress has become increasingly critical. However the White House is still reluctant to criticise President Pervez Musharraf because of America's desperate need to enlist Pakistani troops for Iraq.

After meeting President Musharraf on Monday in Islamabad, Richard Armitage, the US deputy secretary of state, gave a ringing endorsement for his support in the war against terrorism. But on Oct 1, Mr Armitage told Congressional leaders in Washington: "I do not think that that affection for working with us extends up and down the rank-and-file of the Pakistani security community."

Quetta the road stretches 80 miles through desert and mountains to Kandahar, the former Taliban capital.

Western aid agencies there have virtually ceased operating outside the city. Last week the Taliban killed two Afghan aid workers helping to repatriate refugees and wounded an Afghan engineer involved in mine clearing.

Yousuf Pashtun, the Governor of Kandahar province, says Pakistan has allowed the Taliban to establish six training camps in Baluchistan. He accused the Pakistani authorities of "wanting to push the Taliban into another big battle with government forces", fearing that in the next phase "the Taliban will start urban terrorism".