

Taliban Drown Our Values In Sea Of Blood, Say Political Leaders From The Pashtun Tribes

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By Ahmed Rashid in Peshawar

Hundreds of political leaders and chiefs from the Pashtun tribes inhabiting Pakistan's border with Afghanistan have for the first time held a peace jirga, or tribal council, demanding an end to Taliban violence.

Clean-shaven tribal chiefs with large turbans, religious scholars with long beards and young political activists sat together in a large hall in the Pakistani border city of Peshawar to demand that the peaceful traditions of the Pashtun tribes which "are being drowned out in a sea of blood" be restored.

Many of the gathered throng also demanded an end to the alleged support of the Taliban by elements within the Islamabad government of President Pervez Musharraf, who insists that he is an ally in the war against terrorism and whose police arrested 39 suspected Taliban fighters in the city of Quetta yesterday. "The Taliban are not the creation of Pashtun society, but the creation of the Pakistan army," said Afsandiyar Wali, head of the Awami National Party (ANP).

"Pashtuns stand united for peace but the fire of war is burning our land and we have to find the means to extinguish it."

The jirga was organised by the ANP, a secular Pashtun nationalist party that has been marginalised in the past decade due to its criticism of Pakistan's military regime and the wave of Islamic extremism that has flooded the tribal belt on both sides of the border.

However, the ANP and other democrats are regaining popularity because of fears within the tribes about growing "Talibanisation" among Pashtuns.

The Taliban are predominantly Pashtun and they are recruiting both Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns to fight the 5,500 British troops deployed in southern Afghanistan. Pakistani Taliban have also declared an Islamic state in North Waziristan on the Pakistani side.

Tribal chiefs alleged that the military's Inter Services Intelligence agency was helping the Taliban plan a new offensive next year, aimed at defeating Nato in southern Afghanistan and toppling the government of President Hamid Karzai.

The chiefs claimed the Taliban were being allowed to move large amounts of weapons and ammunition to the Afghan border. Government officials in Peshawar vehemently denied the claim.

The jirga also heard from Taliban supporters such as Maulana Fazlur Rehman, a cleric who heads a radical Islamic party that rules the border provinces of Balochistan and the North West Frontier.

"The Taliban are in the forefront of resistance against foreign occupation forces in Afghanistan," said Mr Rehman. "The UN has declared them terrorists so the only way left to defend themselves is by picking up the gun." However, his words were drowned out by dozens of speakers who said that the Taliban were a threat to peace and a negation of Pashtun values.

"Around the world we are accused of being terrorists, but tolerance is in our blood. We demand all the world respect our values, culture and the dignity of our people," said Mehmood Khan Achakzai, the leader of a moderate Pashtun party in Balochistan.