

Taliban's winter offensive to destabilise region

By Ahmed Rashid

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Many of the factors that led to uprisings in the Arab world also exist in Pakistan and Afghanistan. But guest columnist Ahmed Rashid says the Taliban, who have escalated violence to unprecedented levels, would harness any revolt in this unstable region.

The winter months are usually when Taliban fighters take a rest.

But as foreign forces enter a critical stage of their preparations for withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban have stepped up the violence as part of a plan to destabilise the entire region.

In the past six weeks, more than 200 Afghan civilians have been killed and hundreds more wounded in a series of brutal suicide bombings, gun battles and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks across the country.

Many of the most bloody attacks have taken place in urban areas considered secure by the government and Nato forces.

Part of the reason for such attacks is as retaliation against US Special Forces, who have been launching up to 20 attacks night and day in the winter months on Taliban leaders and their logistical networks, killing or capturing hundreds of fighters.

Afghan and Pakistani Taliban are also being regularly killed in Pakistan through the use of drone missiles.

Although US commanders are speaking of successes in their campaign to oust the Taliban from their heartland in the Afghan provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, many experts wonder whether the Taliban have merely retreated temporarily and whether this US-led campaign is sustainable in the long term.

'Weak' government

Moreover President Hamid Karzai, the parliament and the courts are locked in an interminable political confrontation which relates back to last year's parliamentary elections.

Many aid and development programs have come to a halt because of the increased pace of violence. The rising cost of fuel and food has angered many Afghans.

Several of Mr Karzai's opponents from the former Northern Alliance have also stepped up their criticism of the government on controversial issues, such as Mr Karzai's determination to open talks with the Taliban.

The Kabul government appears weak and vulnerable at a critical moment - in a few weeks' time Mr Karzai is expected to announce which areas are considered safe enough for Western forces to withdraw and be replaced by Afghan forces.

This is part of US President Barack Obama's plan to start a gradual withdrawal and reconfiguration of some US and Nato forces starting in July.

In Pakistan, the Pakistani Taliban - both in the north-west and in Punjab province - are on the offensive.

The Punjabi Taliban have claimed responsibility for the murder in Islamabad of Shahbaz Bhatti, the federal minister of minorities and a Christian leader, who had become the leading advocate of amending the controversial blasphemy laws after the murder in January of Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab province.

At the same time religious parties and Islamist extremist groups have joined hands to give voice to an unprecedented wave of anti-Americanism after Raymond Davis - reportedly a CIA contractor - was arrested for shooting dead two Pakistanis in Lahore. A third Pakistani was run over by a US consular vehicle while the wife of one of the victims committed suicide.

The US is insisting he should be freed as he has diplomatic immunity, but the Pakistanis are putting him on trial for murder.

Islamist groups have been able to mobilise considerable public feeling over the blasphemy issue, anti-Americanism sparked by the Davis case and the worsening economic crisis.

The ruling coalition led by the Pakistan Peoples Party has failed to come up with a counter strategy to foil this campaign by the fundamentalists, nor has it provided any leadership or direction to the public.

There is unprecedented apprehension about the future among Pakistan's urban classes.

Political strife

At the same time there has been a serious decline in US-Pakistan relations especially between the US military and the CIA on one side, and the Pakistan army and the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) on the other.

The over-arching tension between the two sides is over the future of Afghanistan.

The Pakistan military is deeply angry at what they say is the refusal of the US to share their plans about the future of Afghanistan with the Pakistanis and US refusal to involve Pakistan in possible future talks with the Afghan Taliban leadership who many observers believe all reside in Pakistan.

The lack of will and leadership shown by both the Afghan and Pakistani governments, the internal political strife in both countries between their respective governments and oppositions, coupled by the severe economic downturn has all helped to contribute to the Taliban stepping up their offensives in both countries.

Many of the social and economic factors, such as jobless and the youth bulge that led to the mass uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya are also prevalent in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

However it is clear that mass movements in either of these countries, which could easily be triggered by a spark, would not necessarily lead to more democracy and human rights.

Instead it is the Taliban and their allies who are waiting in the wings to take over the leadership of any such movements.

Unless both governments get their act together they may well see themselves overwhelmed by an even wider movement led by extremists which would have dire regional and global consequences.

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