

Waziristan: the hub of al-Qaida operations

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The killing of eight tribal elders involved in peace negotiations in the Waziristan region of Pakistan is the first flash of violence in the area for about six months.

The bloodshed unfolded in a series of attacks between Sunday night and Monday morning around Wana, the lawless capital which is a hotbed of al-Qaida linked violence.

The Pakistani military reported attacks on two "peace committee" offices in Wana and the nearby Shikai Valley, a rugged mountain retreat where soldiers discovered a network of al-Qaida safehouses in 2005.

The bloodletting underscores the collapse of government authority in Waziristan, where 100,000 troops are deployed, and the perils run by those engaged in controversial efforts to broker peace between the government and well-armed militants. The stakes are high. US intelligence officials claim Waziristan has become al-Qaida's international operations hub, a lawless morass where militants are plotting fresh attacks on the west. A report in Sunday's New York Times suggested the US government was considering sending special forces teams and new CIA operatives to Pakistan to capture or kill top al-Qaida officials.

Waziristan is also a major worry for the Pakistani government.

The "Talibanisation" of North West Frontier province - involving the imposition of strict social edicts at gunpoint - first took root here, and the president, Pervez Musharraf, has identified a prominent local commander, Baitullah Mehsud, as the main suspect in the December 27 assassination of the opposition leader, Benazir Bhutto.

The militants are a loosely allied patchwork of local tribesmen, Taliban commanders and foreign fighters from Arab countries, Chechnya and Uzbekistan. Efforts to broker a peace deal have been fraught with bloodshed and deeply controversial.

Militants have assassinated dozens of pro-government elders - at least 50 in 2006, according to Dr Farzana Shaikh of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Many died in night-time attacks similar to the shootings on Sunday night.

"Eight in one night is not particularly surprising. On one occasion, four tribal leaders were found beheaded with their heads split. On other occasions, it is the sheer quantity of murders that is alarming," she said.

In recent months, south Waziristan has been relatively quiet as fighting between government and militants shifted across the mountains to north Waziristan. Yesterday's attacks show just how fragile that peace has been.

On Sunday, Ali Muhammad Jan Orakzai, the official behind much of the deal making, resigned as governor of the province. "His resignation marked his failure to achieve a deal," said Shaikh.

Western allies have long been unhappy with the deals that Orakzai helped to broker. A September 2006 accord between Musharraf and militants in north Waziristan was sharply criticised by US officials who claimed it resulted in a surge in cross-border Taliban attacks in Afghanistan and allowed militants to push across northern Pakistan.

"Effectively, the government handed control of the north-west to militants," said Shaikh.

The results are painfully apparent in Swat, a "settled area" on the far side of the province once known for its sweeping mountain scenery, now a battlezone.

Hundreds of lives have been lost in fighting between a new group of Islamist militants, reinforced by allies from Waziristan, and the government. Today, a suicide bomber struck outside the gates of a military compound in Swat, wounding 10 people including eight soldiers, according to news agency reports.

The Swat militants are led by Maulvi Fazlullah, a radical preacher who has been blamed by Musharraf for a wave of suicide attacks across the country.

About 400 people had been wounded and 900 injured in 19 attacks against political rallies and military targets in the past three months, Musharraf told reporters in Islamabad last week.

The explanation for the latest eight deaths could be linked to local factors as much as the faltering peace process, analysts said. Uzbek militants linked to al-Qaida sheltering near Wana were killed last month. Reprisals had been expected.