

By Matthias Gebauer

*Once Pakistan's favourite tourist destination is now ruled by a hardliner Taliban group. Mullah Fazlullah has installed a Sharia emirate here, and President Musharraf has stood by and allowed it to happen*

**T**HE huge billboard on the pass high in the mountains may be yellow and faded but it's still legible. "Welcome to Swat Valley", is written in huge letters with a picture of a jeep surrounded by tourists underneath.

They are all smiling, enjoying the view from the mountains, that range 2,000 metres high into the clear blue skies. The advertisement harks back to a time when the Swat Valley was considered the Switzerland of Pakistan. Islamabad's middle classes would tramp up the mountains in the summer and in winter they would whiz down the country's only ski slopes. "A paradise on earth", was Swat's motto.

That was before the Swat Valley came to epitomise the current crisis in Pakistan, before President Pervez Musharraf used the region as an excuse for his state of emergency. The military ruler claimed to want to come down hard on the religious extremists by imposing emergency rule. And he repeats this claim at every opportunity. But it has since become clear that the general was most concerned with holding on to power.

The dangerous journey to Swat reveals a lot about how weak Musharraf and his Army is in the conflict with the extremists inside the country - and that they have been allowed to thrive for far too long. There are soldiers stationed just behind the advertising billboard. They are nervous, wear bullet-proof vests and helmets and have their weapons at the ready. "You must be mad to want to travel there", says the commander of the last checkpoint before the town of Mingora. "This is where Mullah

Fazlullah's emirate begins." Anyone he doesn't like is killed.

It is a confession: The Army has long lost control over the area north of here. A de-facto state within a state has been established. And a 'brutal' commander is in complete control - the Mullah Maulana Fazlullah.

**A Jihad against Musharraf:** With its anarchy and lawlessness, the Swat Valley has come to symbolise

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Pakistan in the year 2007. This time it's not about the tribal areas, such as Waziristan along the Afghan border, where radical Islamists have been successfully undermining the power of the state. The Swat Valley is just a few hours drive from Islamabad. And Mullah Fazlullah's jihad is directed at Musharraf's regime. He and his fighters want to see a strict Islamist state, that is not oriented towards the US but to Sharia law. It is an enemy in the heart of the country - one that Musharraf seems increasingly incapable of dealing with.

Only the remnants of Musharraf's authority are visible beyond the checkpoint. Army posts with their clay huts and corrugated iron have been deserted. The police stations are either empty or masked militants with Kalashnikovs lounge on the steps. The driver doesn't want to stop anywhere. He is only willing to embark on the journey after lengthy discussions and taking the precaution of dressing in shalwar kameez clothing, the traditional garb that resembles a night shirt. Like everyone here, he is afraid. The journey is perilous - even journalists have been known to be beheaded on Fazlullah's orders, on suspicion that they were spies.

The history of the takeover of the Swat Valley began long before Musharraf started to raise the alarm a few months ago. It has been more than two years since 28-year-old student Fazlullah built a madrassa in Iman Deri, a small pretty town near the Swat River. People in Mingora know the young man who now has a long black gray beard that reaches his belly and who drags his right leg because of a past polio infection.

He went to school in Mingora in the 1990s, but dropped out. That's when Fazlullah joined the "Movement for the Imposition of Islamic Laws", and made no bones about his aims.

"He is a simple man", says his former teacher. "But that is exactly how he is able to win over the people here." The villagers say that the construction work on the madrassa went amazingly quickly. Hundreds of volunteers helped and money was no problem. Masked armed guards began to patrol the red mud-brick building and checked visitors. Every week more and more men arrived with weapons. The creation of the Fazlullah militia had begun.

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have experienced. In Afghanistan, they whisper, he fought against the Russians. And then he sat with the leader of the Sharia movement in prison. The fact that this is all highly unlikely is immaterial. Fazlullah has succeeded in doing what every Taliban leader aspires to - he has become a myth, and one that spreads fear.

Fazlullah, who named himself Mullah, copied the tactics of the schools in Afghanistan. During the hour of prayer he punctually broadcast his Islamic interpretation of the Quran, thus reaching even the women behind the high walls, and gave himself the nickname FM Mullah. The authorities in the valley sat on their hands and looked on as the young Fazlullah used his preaching to openly threaten those who did not adhere to Sharia law, and by the beginning of 2007 he had begun to call the Swat Valley an "Islamic Emirate". "No one accepted responsibility", says one teacher in Mingora. "Nobody wanted trouble."

At night, Fazlullah's men distributed newsletters and threatened all the CD shops and barbers with death if they didn't close down. Several bombs exploded in bazaars, and girls' schools - to whose uniforms Fazullah took exception - received hate mail. In radio broadcasts, he ordered mothers not to let their daughters out of the house.

The strategy of terror worked. Today the bazaar's streets are dead. CDs are only being sold on the black market. Schools have been on holiday for weeks. Mullah Fazlullah's emirate has become reality.

American and European diplomats see the valley's takeover as further evidence that their ally Musharraf is not entirely committed to fighting the extremists and that his Army might not even be capable of doing so, despite the billions in aid it receives from Washington. "The government simply let the situation keep going", says a high-ranking Western offi-

cer, "and now people are pretending this is a recent problem". The USA and other countries have tried repeatedly to draw attention to the Swat Valley, but were reassured everything was under control. "Now it's too late".

Musharraf only responded, as is so often the case, when the West exerted pressure. At the end of October, a Western photographer snuck into the Sharia state and took spectacular pictures: donation

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tables where poor villagers gave their last possessions to the armed Jihad, hooded militants patrolling the streets. The intelligence agents warned that Uzbek, Tajik and other Al Qaeda sympathisers were enjoying the protection of Mullah Fazlullah. The US started putting pressure on Musharraf to finally act.

Since then, the Army has suffered painful losses to the militants. Several soldiers have been beheaded, the pictures published on the Internet. The militias are so brutal that in many cases, the Army and police have cleared out volun-

tarily, relinquishing their weapons. Fazlullah always keeps his PR in mind. When he lets soldiers go, he gives them each 500 rupees compensation. They should be able to buy themselves something to eat on the way home, he jokes. The symbolism is perfect: As Musharraf's Army becomes more demoralised, Fazlullah provides for its soldiers.

Since the state of emergency was announced, Musharraf's generals have been sending report upon report from the Swat Valley. The military's press department has even sent a colonel to the front. This week the Army announced that it had sent in 15,000 soldiers, plus dozens of combat helicopters and mortar shelters. Forty are reported dead so far although nobody can confirm that figure. Even local journalists based in Shangla and Matta have left the area. One of the last pictures taken by a wire photographer shows a police station that has been renamed "Taliban Station" by the militants.

Fazlullah's militants are ready for combat. Earlier this week, Fazullah's spokesman, Siraj Uddin, told Spiegel online in a telephone interview, "The Army has no idea where to shoot, they're just killing civilians". His people had only heard of the state of emergency over the radio. "The Army is running after us, helplessly", he said in triumph, "for the world, this may be new, but for us it's a game we've been playing for a long time". Not surprisingly, he committed to a fight to the end: "We'll defend our mission till the last breath is drawn."

At the end of the interview, Uddin wanted to speak with the Western reporter without an interpreter. "How are you?" he asked in broken English, "my English not good". He didn't wait for an answer. "We are fine, first class, inshallah", he said. Then he hung up. COURTESY SPIEGEL ONLINE