

# A Taliban state of mind

**T**HERE was nothing to celebrate and much to mourn in the NWFP in the year 2007. It was the bloodiest and most violent year in living memory. On average, at least one person fell to a terrorist attack every day. Until a few days ago, the NWFP's crime branch department had recorded a total of 406 people who were killed in suicide bombings, bomb explosions and missile attacks. Their numbers included military and police personnel as well as civilians.

The fear of a takeover by Islamic militants became more or less a reality in parts of the province, while bombing of barbers' salons, video and music shops and girls schools in other districts were the order of the day.

However, governmental complacency enveloped not only the NWFP but also Islamabad, contributing to the forward march of extremist thought and terrorism in the country. The inability to get to the root of the problem and the absence of a comprehensive strategy to deal with the menace complicated matters.

As one security official pointed out, militancy morphed into a hydra-headed monster, not only threatening the social order but also causing people to lose faith in their own security establishment.

Clearly, the emerging threat to national security and the fast-

deteriorating security situation in the NWFP and other parts of the country have their roots in Pakistan's tribal borderlands; and by extension in neighbouring Afghanistan. Ever since Pakistan moved its forces to its western borders in May 2003, it has been grappling with an uncontrollable situation.

It has toyed with various options and tried different solutions, from the use of outright military force to what some see as total capitulation to the militants. Nothing seems to have worked so far. And Pakistan has had to pay dearly.

When the government hurriedly signed a peace agreement in September 2006 with militants in North Waziristan, there were few who were willing to accept a fundamentally flawed deal that offered incentives to the militants but profited little in return.

Yet, Islamabad did its utmost to sell the deal to a sceptical western audience. President Musharraf visited Washington D.C. to convince President Bush about the effectiveness and utility of the peace deal, and initially seemed to do so.

However, soon after, the western media launched a series of blistering attacks on Pakistan for signing the agreement to appease the militants as attacks on US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan registered a manifold increase.

The US National Intelligence Estimate, released in July 2007,

spoke of Al Qaeda rebuilding a 'safe haven' in Pakistan's tribal region. Unease also afflicted President Bush when he told the American people in a radio address that "President Musharraf recognises that the agreement has not been successful or well-enforced and is taking active steps to correct it."

Islamabad responded to Washington's apprehensions by sending more troops into North Waziristan. The militants revoked the agreement in July 2007, accusing the government of failing to honour its commitment and violating the terms of the agreement.

NWFP Governor Ali Muhammad Jan Aurakzai, the chief architect of the North Waziristan deal, scrambled to salvage it by attempting to put in place a verifiable implementation mechanism. But it was too late. Attacks on security forces and security installations resumed.

In South Waziristan, the situation remained volatile. In January 2007, army gunship helicopters struck a militant compound in a remote village, claiming to have killed more than 20 militants. Militant leader Baitullah Mehsud responded angrily, threatening to avenge the deaths.

The threat was followed by a string of suicide attacks in North Waziristan, Peshawar and Dera Ismail Khan. An attack in Peshawar killed 12 people, including its much loved and respected police chief Malik

force. This was a significant step taken by a party widely perceived as pro-Taliban.

Months later in September, a well-known religious scholar and a former MNA of the JUI-F, Maulana Hassan Jan, who had spoken out against suicide bombing, was killed in mysterious circumstances.

Clashes intensified between security forces and militants in restive North Waziristan with more roadside bombings, forcing the military to launch a fierce attack on the militants' hideout in and around Mir Ali sub district. The attacks, with air support, compelled the local tribes to seek a truce and form volunteer armed tribal lashkars to expel foreign militants. The operation was halted for inexplicable reasons halfway through and attacks on the security forces resumed.

Kohat's military cantonment also fell victim to militancy when a suicide bomber struck a mosque killing 18 soldiers and others. The military cantonment saw another suicide bomber striking in December, killing 12 army recruits.

Security bases knew no respite from such attacks. In September, a suicide bomber got into a high-security military commando unit base in Tarbela, Haripur district, killing 15 people. The commando unit was part of the Special Operation Task Force, a US-trained elite anti-terrorist military unit involved in operations against Al Qaeda in the tribal regions. The same month, Dera Ismail Khan also saw terrorism. Eighteen people were killed when a teenage suicide bomber struck. On October 1, 16 people died when a burqa-clad suicide bomber struck at a police check post in Bannu.

Earlier on, Bannu, the home

Menacingly, and perhaps more alarmingly from Pakistan's internal security perspective, militants from all the tribal regions and some districts of the NWFP met at an undisclosed location in the Mehsud part of South Waziristan in early December, nominated Baitullah Mehsud as their commander and formed a joint shura and an organisation they called the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, to chalk out a strategy, defend each other and coordinate their actions.

Meanwhile, the government continued to allow militants to challenge its writ. In Swat, until recently Maulana Fazlullah ruled the airwaves through his illegal FM radio. His sermons, initially targeting the polio vaccination campaign, turned more venomous. The government either paid little attention or looked the other way, despite reports of the growing presence of militants from certain banned extremist outfits.

In a June 4 presentation to the National Security Council meeting chaired by President Musharraf, Aftab Sherpao outlined threats to Pakistan's internal security from militants across Fata and the NWFP. "Time is of the essence. We must act before it's too late," he told the meeting.

Decisions were taken including the one to send troops to Swat. But before these could be deployed, Frontier Constabulary personnel suffered their first major casualty when a bomber hit a bus, killing 17 of them.

It would take the government some more months, and only after the militants had taken over Swat and the neighbouring district of Shangla threatening the closure of the Karakoram Highway linking Pakistan and



followed by two suicide bombing incidents in Islamabad, one at a five-star hotel and the other at the airport; investigators knew where to look for the connection and they blamed Mehsud for the attacks.

Apparently, the only silver lining was in South Waziristan's regional headquarters, Wana, where a pro-government militant commander, Maulvi Nazir spearheaded a tribal uprising against foreign militants, notably the Uzbeks. The March 2007 uprising, with active government support, enabled the Ahmadzai Wazir tribesmen to expel the foreign militants who had taken refuge in the restive tribal region following the US invasion of Afghanistan in November 2001.

Around the same time (and later in May), Mother Nature also wreaked havoc as heavy rains, thunderstorms and floods struck parts of the northern regions of the NWFP, exacting a huge human and material toll.

One more indication that militancy was spiralling out of control and spilling over to other districts of the NWFP manifested itself in increasing attacks of a sectarian nature. It happened in the sectarian-sensitive district of Dera Ismail Khan where in April authorities had to impose curfew and call in the army to bring the situation under control. Similar attacks were seen in Peshawar but these were aimed at individuals, without causing a wider law and order situation.

There were two major sectarian flare-ups in the Kurram tribal region in April and later in November that claimed the lives of close to 300 people. In April, then Interior Minister Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao survived the first of the two suicide bombings aimed at him. The second attack came on Dec 21 when a suicide bomber blew himself up during an Eid congregation. The two suicide bombings, both in Sherpao's home district of Charsadda, left close to 84 dead and nearly 200 wounded.

In May, another suicide bomber struck an Afghan restaurant in Peshawar killing 22 people including the Afghan owner of the restaurant and his two sons. By this time, it had become obvious that militancy was not confined to the two Waziristans as authorities in the Bajaur and Mohmand tribal region made efforts to reach out to the tribes.

Those efforts met with partial success but attacks on security forces and government installations continued. Authorities are now concerned that militant groups operating from Mohmand are behind most of the attacks in Charsadda and Peshawar.

Worried that the deteriorating law and order situation was bringing a bad name to the MMA-ruled NWFP, the JUI-F organised a convention of more than 1,000 seminaries in Peshawar in April to denounce suicide bombing and oppose the implementation of the Sharia by

army recruits. Security bases knew no respite from such attacks. In September, a suicide bomber got into a high-security military commando unit base in Tarbela, Haripur district, killing 15 people. The commando unit was part of the Special Operation Task Force, a US-trained elite anti-terrorist military unit involved in operations against Al Qaeda in the tribal regions. The same month, Dera Ismail Khan also saw terrorism. Eighteen people were killed when a teenage suicide bomber struck. On October 1, 16 people died when a burqa-clad suicide bomber struck at a police check post in Bannu.

Earlier on, Bannu, the home district of former Chief Minister Akram Khan Durrani, had come under a rocket attack killing nine people.

In one of the most bizarre incidents of the year, 242 soldiers and their officers were taken hostage by militants associated with Baitullah Mehsud in South Waziristan.

Negotiations dragged on as the militants demanded the complete withdrawal of the army from the Mehsud area and the release of 30 of their comrades in government custody, some of them convicted by courts on terrorism-related charges.

Militants released the army hostages on November 4, a day after President Musharraf proclaimed a state of emergency in the country and suspended the Constitution. They were released in return for the release of 25 of their comrades, two convicted by the courts, and the army abandoning their posts in Mehsud tribal territory.

On his part, Baitullah Mehsud agreed to abide by the February 7, 2005, Sara Rogha agreement, cease attacks on security forces and government installations and expel foreign militants from his area. The prisoners-swap deal fell through when, according to tribal interlocutors, the government reneged on its commitment to release the remaining five prisoners.

China, to launch an operation against them.

Shangla has since been cleared of militants and a major part of Swat has been brought back under government control but challenges remain including the fear of the militants returning once the army leaves.

After all this bloodshed, if any appetite is left for NWFP politics, it would have to be for the squabbling within the ruling MMA ranks over the presidential polls.

The APDM in its Sept 28 meeting in Peshawar decided to seek the dissolution of the NWFP Assembly on October 2, a date suggested by the JUI-F. It transpired later that the date had been set to give ample time to the pro-Musharraf opposition in the NWFP to move a no-trust motion against Chief Minister Durrani to scuttle the dissolution of the NWFP Assembly and facilitate Gen Musharraf in his re-election from all four assemblies on October 6.

To be sure, it happened just as the schemers of the Musharraf regime had planned. The issue has caused not only a rift within the opposition parties but also a virtual split inside the MMA with the JI boycotting the Jan 8 elections and the JUI-F contesting them. The future political scene of the NWFP remains uncertain and is likely to see a coalition government of more than two parties at the provincial level.

More than politics, it would be the sense of insecurity and the deteriorating law and order situation that will haunt the hapless people of this province, unless the government comes up with an intelligent and tenable strategy to deal with the situation in a determined manner. ■