

Tough battle in stronghold

South Waziristan will be a very hard nut to crack. It is the mother of all problems.

By Sabrina Tavernise & Pir Zubair Shah

PAKISTAN has been fighting militants for weeks in a green valley north of the capital. Even as that battle is fought, it is now gearing up for the most decisive test of the war, in the rugged western mountains that are the Taliban's prime sanctuary. The area, South Waziristan, presents the toughest challenge for Pakistan in its fight to curb its growing insurgency. It is home to Baitullah Mehsud, Pakistan's enemy No 1, who leads the Taliban here and has engineered dozens of suicide bombings in recent years.

Mr Mehsud now has thousands of fighters entrenched in mountain terrain that is nearly impossible for conventional armies to navigate, and past efforts to capture him, most recently last year, have failed.

What is more, Pakistan is fighting the Taliban in several areas already and has committed 22,000 troops to its campaign in the valley, called Swat. While military officials say troop strength is not a problem, more forces will be needed to hold newly taken areas, which have gone un-patrolled for years. "South Waziristan will be a very hard nut to crack," said Talat Masood, a military analyst and retired Pakistani general. "It is the mother of all problems."

"It's here that the real battle for the soul of

Pakistan will be fought," he said.

Mr Mehsud has often hidden in plain sight — even holding well-attended news conferences — fueling suspicions that the government has not been serious about killing or capturing him.

But this time is different, analysts and officials say. The military is buoyed by a level of public support and political consensus that it never had before. In the Swat Valley last year, timidity, half measures and limited patrols left the military bogged down in more than a year of

Virtually the only pressure on Mr Mehsud and his supporters and allies, which include elements of Al Qaeda, has been applied by missile strikes by remotely piloted American drones.

But in recent weeks, Pakistan has started quietly applying pressure, bombing suspected hide-outs in three areas, strikes that a United States Defence Department official called the beginning of the next phase of the campaign against the Taliban.

On Monday, Pakistan's Army Chief, Gen

Even if the military prevails, that will be only the beginning. The area is one of the country's poorest, a condition that has made it ripe for militancy. A more lasting solution would require economic opportunity and government support, including an adequate police force

fighting. It finally agreed to cede the area to the Taliban in February. After the Taliban took yet another district, the military finally fought back last month, displacing millions of civilians, but also putting the Taliban on the defensive.

In Waziristan, the challenge is similar, if much harder. A succession of peace deals over the years have allowed Mr Mehsud and his supporters to dig themselves securely into some of the most rugged terrain in the country.

Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, flew over the region and said Mr Mehsud "must be eliminated". The army has choked off roads. A heavy equipment dealer from the area said his company had not been able to buy diesel for three weeks.

"We're shaping the environment," said a senior Pakistani military official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to give details about operations. "Choking the routes. Control of exit and

ld of Pakistan insurgency

problems. It's here that the real battle for the soul of Pakistan will be fought

entrance. Regulating the movement. Checking."

On Sunday, a local official announced that the government had given the go-ahead for an offensive, but a military spokesman on Monday declined to provide details.

Another, more fundamental shift may also be afoot. Mr Mehsud killed many tribal elders to amass power in his domain, and officials say he has alienated so many people that some are now turning against him. The military has begun trying to exploit a rift within the Taliban itself to

many as 30 people loyal to Mr Mehsud.

In a sign of their strength, and of Mr Mehsud's waning influence in their area, the group met with several hundred tribesmen near Mr Mehsud's area last week. "Last year that would have been impossible," said a local journalist who covered the meeting.

The military denies giving any support to the group, but a spokesman for the group said in a telephone interview on Sunday that it received modest financing from the government, through

Pakistan to fortify it. Commanders are dividing responsibilities, designating fighters for bomb making and remote detonation, said a fighter who spoke by telephone from the area.

"There's a high level of preparation going on in all of South Waziristan," he said. Even in Wana, a town outside Mr Mehsud's area, the roads were so heavily mined that many preferred to walk.

The fighters said the Taliban recently shut down courts they operated in the area, telling those who needed disputes resolved to come back in two months, because those who staffed them were now focused on fighting.

An associate of Mr Mehsud said that the Taliban had the advantage of geography. "We are up," he said, chopping the air above his head with the side of his hand, "and they are down."

Even if the military prevails, that will be only the beginning. The area is one of the country's poorest, a condition that has made it ripe for militancy. A more lasting solution would require economic opportunity and government support, including an adequate police force.

In Bajaur, part of the Tribal Areas, the military cleared out militants last year, at great cost to civilians, but the militants have reasserted control. The reason, said Mr Masood, the military analyst, is that a local government was never properly established.

That held a lesson.

"Militancy is like a monster," said Habibullah Khan, a top bureaucrat for the Tribal Areas. "Even if only the tail is left, it will grow again from there." COURTESY THE NEW YORK TIMES

Baitullah Mehsud has often hidden in plain sight — even holding well-attended news conferences — fueling suspicions that the government has not been serious about killing or capturing him. But this time is different, analysts and officials say. The military is buoyed by a level of public support and political consensus that it never had before

further isolate him, analysts said.

"If someone skinned Baitullah Mehsud alive, no one would cry in this country," said an official based in Peshawar, the regional capital, who helps oversee the area. "The environment that made Baitullah is no more."

One such faction is led by two of Mr Mehsud's former allies: Qari Zainuddin and Turkestan Bhaitani. Residents in the towns where they are strong say the group has killed as

a religious donations fund, Zakat. He said the group had about 2,000 members. Although it opposes Mr Mehsud, the spokesman said, it supports the Taliban's war against the Americans in Afghanistan.

"We are against Baitullah Mehsud and we want to finish him," said the spokesman, who identified himself as Tufan Mehsud.

Fighters loyal to Baitullah Mehsud have been moving into the area from elsewhere in