

Ex-pat billionaire Murdoch tells his erstwhile countrymen: 'You're a load of bludgers'

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World News

THE INDEPENDENT
TUESDAY 4 NOVEMBER 2008

The valley of terror

► Taliban forces burn schools and behead opponents during advance across four-fifths of Swat Valley

► Tribal militiamen are kidnapped and killed as signs are erected in largest city warning women not to shop

By Omar Waraich

IN MINGORA, SWAT VALLEY

IT WAS routinely vaunted as the "Switzerland of Asia". A plush region of mountains, dense forests and shimmering azure rivers. For years it was favoured as a choice holiday destination for Pakistan's middle classes.

Now, a year after the Pakistani military launched a campaign here to halt a Taliban insurgency, officials fear that four-fifths of the state has slipped from their control. While the world's attention has been fixed on the counter-insurgency operations in the volatile tribal areas along the Afghan border, the forces loyal to local Taliban commander Maulana Fazlullah have swiftly advanced across Swat Valley, beheading opponents and torching homes and schools as they enforce their brutal brand of Islamic law.

Muzzafar Ali and his family fled their village in Matta two months ago, after being threatened by the Taliban. "Just look at what is happening," the silver-haired 62-year-old says with mounting indignation. "They behead people, shoot people, destroy schools and hospitals." Sitting in a small, crowded room that he must now call home, Mr Ali recalls how he and his family were forced out.

"They said that I was against them," says the landowner, in a near whisper. To drive home their point, the Taliban ringed his home with dynamite. "I had to get my children away, leaving at 3.30am with nothing but the clothes on our backs. They torched four of our homes and blew up what was left."

With equal ruthlessness, Mr Fazlullah's forces have seized firm control of the three largest districts - Matta, Kabal and Charbagh, forming a tightening noose around the city of Mingora. "The writ of the state has been reduced to 15 per cent of Swat district ... and even much of that is symbolic," says Shoukat Ali Yousafzai, the top local administrator, who is now alone after his fellow officials fled.

Even in Mingora it is difficult to spot



Taliban militants man a roadblock in Charbagh, a Taliban stronghold near Mingora, the main town of Pakistan's Swat Valley. SHERIN ZADA KANJU/REUTERS

more than a couple of policemen. The Frontier Constabulary has faced an unprecedented number of desertions. And with a devastating series of attacks on police stations, including the levelling of the central prison by a large bomb last month, the police are reluctant to come out on to the streets and have turned their buildings into fortresses surrounded by concrete blocks, barbed wire and sand bags.

Local residents complain that the police are "too busy protecting themselves" to look after them.

"Mercifully, the Taliban aren't nearby," Muhammad Hayat, a 49-year-old businessman, says. His family speak of

a fear of militancy by day, and being shaken in their beds by the rumble of artillery fire at night. He says four people have been killed nearby recently. Among them was Mukhtiar Khan, a relative, who was shot in the bustling main bazaar by the Taliban.

Earlier this year, the militants

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SHOUKAT ALI YOUSAFZAI
LOCAL ADMINISTRATOR

attacked the grid station, plunging the city into darkness for over a month. A newspaper vendor says the Taliban told him not to serve government offices, and signs have been erected warning women not to shop.

In the bazaar there is little enthusiasm for the Taliban. But some find its offer of swift but brutal justice appealing. By targeting the wealthy, residents say, the Taliban won support from the poor. Young, unemployed men have found status as local commanders with large salaries, from Mr Fazlullah's mysteriously deep pockets. Others were enlisted at gunpoint.

The army is struggling to contain

the militants or win over the local population. A recent attempt to raise a tribal militia to counter the Taliban failed last week after the militants kidnapped its members and killed 12 of them, hanging their bodies in public.

Major-General Athar Abbas, the military's chief spokesman, concedes that there are "problems" but insists that the army will "clear them out".

But even fiercely anti-Taliban types like Mr Hayat are not so sure. "The Taliban has checkpoints less than a kilometre away from army checkpoints, it makes people suspicious," he says. "Too many innocent people have died as collateral damage."

Pakistan urges America to halt air strikes on militants

By Andrew Buncombe

ASIA CORRESPONDENT

AMERICA'S TOP military commander in Afghanistan and Iraq has been urged to halt unauthorised air strikes against militants in Pakistan because they are stirring up anti-US sentiment and creating difficulties for the civilian government. In Islamabad, General

David Petraeus, the new head of US Central Command, was told that such strikes - often using missiles fired from pilotless Predator drones - caused public "outrage".

While the US may be targeting militants in the tribal areas believed responsible for cross-border attacks on Western troops in Afghanistan, many Pakistani civilians, including women and children, have been killed.

General Petraeus, accompanied by the US Assistant Secretary of State, Richard Boucher, met Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari yesterday. Mr Zardari was quoted as telling the general: "Continuing drone attacks on our territory, which result in loss of precious lives and property, are counter-productive and difficult to explain by a democratically elected government. It is creating a credibility gap." In the

past three months there have been around 20 such attacks, the most recent over the weekend in North and South Waziristan where up to 32 people were killed.

The warning to General Petraeus, who is likely to also meet the Prime Minister, Yousuf Gilani, and army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, is just the latest public rebuke for the US from Pakistan. But the country's new

civilian leadership has been forced to walk a fine line. While wishing to continue to be considered an ally of Washington, the government - embroiled in wide-ranging counter-insurgency operations against militants that have cost the lives of 1,500 Pakistani troops - is in grave danger of being seen as fighting America's war. In public at least, it suits the government to criticise the US's actions.