

Autonomous
Pak Security

Pakistan's 'biggest

By Imtiaz Ali and Craig Whitlock

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EVEN as his reputation has grown more menacing and his militia more powerful, the Taliban commander accused of ordering the death of Benazir Bhutto has shrouded himself in mystery.

When Baitullah Mehsud attended a February 2005 signing ceremony for an ill-fated cease-fire with the Pakistani government, he bundled his face and upper body in a black cloth before appearing in public to scrawl his signature. Like the man to whom he has sworn allegiance, Afghan Taliban leader Mohammad Omar, Mehsud has obsessively avoided cameras and maintained an ascetic lifestyle.

Since then, Mehsud has emerged as perhaps the greatest military threat to the Pakistani government. Last August, just weeks after the cease-fire ended in recriminations, his fighters from South Waziristan stunned the country by capturing a group of more than 200 soldiers who were patrolling the lawless tribal areas

along the border with Afghanistan. Three were executed; the rest were freed in a prisoner swap.

In recent days, Pakistani officials have blamed the Taliban commander for the death of Bhutto, the former prime minister who was killed Dec 27 while campaigning to return to power. Investigations are ongoing, and it remains to be seen whether Mehsud was directly responsible.

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"Baitullah Mehsud is the biggest problem of today's Pakistan, and he is the main factor behind the failure of the government's current policies

in the tribal region", a senior government official said on condition of anonymity in Peshawar, a frontier city near the Afghan border. "Kidnap after kidnap of the security forces by his militants has become a routine matter now and a big embarrassment for the government."

Mehsud, 34, is also accused by Afghan and US officials of organising suicide attacks in

Islamabad. "They'll have to go in and do a military operation to weaken him. He's become too strong. They need to do something to stop the Taliban and the Talibanisation of that region."

Analysts and officials said there are other Taliban commanders who control more territory or bigger forces than Mehsud. But they said his political influence within the notoriously fractious movement has grown rapidly and is probably unparalleled on the Pakistani side of the border.

Last month, for instance, Mehsud was chosen to serve as the head of a 40-member shura, or consultative council, that was formed to coordinate various Taliban factions in Pakistan.

Mehsud is also a favourite commander of Taliban leaders in Afghanistan, including Omar, the one-eyed cleric who has led the movement for a decade, and Jalaluddin Haqqani, a grizzled insurgent leader who has organised attacks against Soviet, US and NATO troops there since the 1980s.

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"There are a couple of other local Taliban commanders who have been influential in their own localities, but Mehsud has overshadowed them all and now his name carries the

day when it comes to militancy in Pakistan", said Ashraf Ali, a researcher at Peshawar University and specialist on the Taliban.

Mehsud was an unknown figure outside the movement until late 2004, when he rose in the ranks after the death of another Pakistani Taliban commander, Nek Mohammed, who was killed in a US cross-border airstrike in South Waziristan.

named one of Pakistan's most wanted men. But he fell out of favour with Omar and other Taliban elders, who saw him as a loose cannon and decided to replace him, analysts said.

Abdullah Mehsud was killed in a raid by Pakistani security forces in July.

Pakistani leaders thought they had successfully brought Baitullah Mehsud under their control when

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In the internal power struggle that followed, Mehsud at first was overshadowed by a fellow clansman, Abdullah Mehsud, a former inmate at the US prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, who was released in 2004 and returned to Pakistan only to take up arms again. A one-legged daredevil with a taste for publicity, Abdullah Mehsud ordered the kidnapping of two Chinese engineers in South Waziristan in 2004 and was soon

they persuaded him and several other militant leaders from South Waziristan to sign the cease-fire in February 2005.

Under the deal, the Pakistani Army withdrew its forces from the area in exchange for a pledge by the militants to stop launching attacks against US, Afghan and coalition forces across the border, as well as a promise to refuse shelter to Al Qaeda members and other foreign fighters.

At the time, there were widespread reports that the Pakistani government gave bags of cash to Mehsud and other tribal leaders as a sweetener. Officials have denied it.

Regardless, Mehsud and his faction quickly broke their promises to keep the peace and allowed Al Qaeda leaders to resettle in the area, US officials said. After pressure from US and Afghan officials, Pakistani leaders admitted the peace accord had failed. The cease-fire collapsed last summer, along with a similar deal in North Waziristan.

Analysts said that the non-aggression pact enabled Mehsud to consolidate his power and that his forces are now stronger and better financed than before. They also said he has expanded his sphere of influence from South Waziristan to other tribal areas along the border.

"A bigger portion of South Waziristan now seems like a state within the state, and Baitullah Mehsud is running this like a head of government", said Silab Mehsud, a tribal journalist from the Mehsud clan and the author of a book on the history and culture of the region. "Now he's an all-powerful man whose writ and command is visible across the tribal belt."

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