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'No One Is Safe': Life Under The Rule Of The Pakistani Taliban

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The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) extremist group has regained a foothold in northwestern Pakistan, imposing its brutal rule on hundreds of thousands of people.

Those who live under the TTP say the hard-line Islamist group has severely curbed freedoms and rights, including those of women. Assassinations, kidnappings, extortion, and harassment dominate daily life in some areas, they say.

The TTP was ousted from its bases by a major Pakistani military offensive in 2014. But in recent years it has reestablished its control in pockets of Pakistan's northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where it is currently active in 10 of the 34 districts.

The TTP often rules during the night. After dark, government forces frequently retreat to their posts and bases, and many civilians refuse to venture outside for fear of the militants, locals say.

The return of the TTP to the region has triggered an exodus that has seen thousands of professionals, businesspeople, and wealthy landowners flee the region.

"No one is safe, and no place is immune from their presence," said Humayun Mehsud, who recently fled the district of South Waziristan.

"They have returned in strength."

Mehsud said he escaped his village after the TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, kidnapped and killed his brother, a government worker.

Mehsud, who now lives in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, said the TTP has established its own government in South Waziristan, which is home to around 900,000 people. The militants, he said, control the local economy and have established makeshift courts to settle disputes among locals.

'Atmosphere Of Fear'

The TTP has imposed its extremist version of Islam in areas they control, locals say.

Listening to or playing music is banned. Barbers are barred from shaving or trimming men's beards. Some girls' schools have been shut or destroyed and restrictions have been placed on women leaving their homes in some areas.

"They want to limit our lives here the same way the Afghan Taliban did in their country," said Saleem, a resident of the district of Lakki Marwat.

The TTP and Afghan Taliban have close ideological and organizational ties. Pakistan has accused the Afghan Taliban, which seized power in 2021, of sheltering the Pakistani militants.

Saleem, whose name has been changed to protect his identity, said the TTP has replaced the local authorities in Lakki Marwat, which is home to around 1 million people.

The police, he said, have abandoned their posts after coming under constant TTP attacks and locals are fleeing by their thousands.

Mohsin Tabeer Khan, a political activist and former university lecturer, is among those who have stayed in Lakki Marwat. Critical of the TTP, he has received threats from the militant group.

"The atmosphere of fear is pervasive," said Khan. "Everyone locks themselves up after sunset."

Khan said the TTP has targeted local government workers and security personnel in the district.

"If they catch you carrying a government ID card, you have to worry about your life," he said.

Abubakar Kurmiwal said the TTP has recently made inroads in the district of Kurram.

He said the TTP on August 14 kidnapped his cousin, who was accused of being a government spy. Four days later, his body was found on the side of the road, he said.

"Women cannot leave their houses because of these militants," he said. "The militants often force locals to feed them."

Last month, the only school in his village was closed after all its teachers fled, he said.

'State Authority Collapses'

Mohsin Dawar, a former lawmaker, has witnessed the TTP's growing influence in his native district of North Waziristan.

First, it started with TTP fighters forcing locals to feed them, said Dawar. Soon after, the militants extorted businessmen and wealthy landowners. Now, they are destroying schools for girls in the district, he said.

"As the [Pakistani] Taliban gains strength, the state authority collapses," said Dawar, who heads the secular National Democratic Movement (NDM) party.

"They first want to kill people whose deaths will generate news," he said. "Everyone is at risk, but those who have some prominence in society are in their crosshairs," added Dawar, who has survived several assassination attempts.

The TTP's attacks have surged in Pakistan in recent years. The militant group has often targeted the army and police and largely refrained from hitting civilian targets.

Abdul Sayed, a Sweden-based researcher who tracks the TTP, said the group is "primarily targeting" the security forces in an attempt to drive them out of the region.

Pakistan earlier this year said the military would launch a new offensive to root out militants in the region. The planned military operation has been [fiercely opposed](#) by locals in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the scene of numerous offensives that killed thousands and uprooted millions of civilians in the past.

Protests have similarly been staged against the TTP and its return to the region.

Abdul Wahid, a local leader of the secular Awami National Party, said locals no longer fear the militants or the Pakistani military after enduring years of strife.

“There is a lot of political awareness here now,” said Wahid, who is from the district of Khyber. “We will protest and resist peacefully.”

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Northwestern Pakistan: Extremist group Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has recently gained in influence; those who live under its rule say the group has severely restricted freedoms and rights, including those of women

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