

Pakistan and Taliban Appear Near Deal

By ISMAIL KHAN

PESHAWAR, Pakistan — Government officials and Taliban militants appeared to be near a deal Sunday on the violent Swat region of northern Pakistan, where the militants declared a unilateral 10-day cease-fire and the government indicated it was willing to accept the imposition of Islamic law.

Any formal truce would be a major concession by the government, which, despite a military operation in Swat involving 12,000 Pakistani Army troops, has been losing ground to a Taliban force of about 3,000 fighters. The militants have kept a stranglehold on the area for months, killing local police officers and officials and punishing residents who do not adhere to strict Islamic tenets.

High-level talks on Taliban demands for Shariah law in Swat and the surrounding region were to continue on Monday in Islamabad, Pakistan, involving President Asif Ali Zardari; the army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani; and senior local officials. But on Sunday, a prominent regional official, Mian Iftikhar Hussain, said that there was already an agreement in principle.

The Taliban made several gestures on Sunday that appeared to be aimed at moving the deal along, including declaring a 10-day cease-fire with government troops in Swat. A militant spokesman there, Muslim Khan, said the move was made out of good

will and told reporters that “our fighters will neither target security forces nor government installations.” But he insisted that the militants would fight back if attacked.

Earlier, Mr. Khan said that the Taliban had released a Chinese engineer, Long Xiaowei, who had been held hostage since August, The Associated Press reported.

Previous attempts at truces in the region have fallen apart, most notably last May. And the United States has strongly opposed making political concessions to the Taliban, urging Mr. Zardari’s government to fight more vigor-

ously.

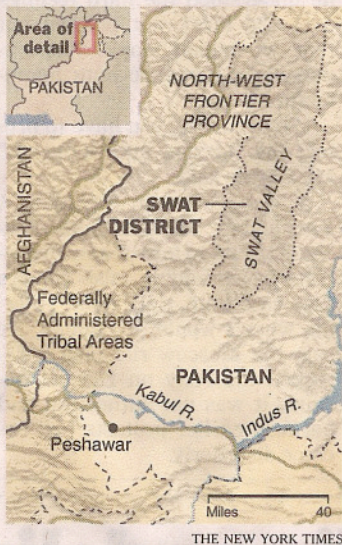
That appeared to happen last summer, when the army began an offensive in Swat. But the move quickly stalled, with troops reduced mostly to remotely shelling suspected Taliban sites and the militants effectively imposing their authority throughout the region.

Since then, Taliban leaders have proscribed what they call un-Islamic activities by residents, including watching television, dancing and shaving beards, and they have sometimes beheaded offenders. The penalties are regularly, and terrifyingly, announced over radio stations under the militants’ control. Tens of thousands of residents of the area, which was once a popular tourist spot and considered a mainstream part of the country, have fled the intimidation and violence.

It was unclear what any formal truce would include, and the government had recently said that it was not planning to withdraw troops from Swat.

Mr. Hussain played down the significance of a formal acceptance of Shariah law in the area, saying that it would be mostly a technical agreement.

“We are not enacting any new law,” he said. “The regulation already exists and is enforced in Swat, but the mechanism to enforce it is missing. We are only providing for an increase in the number of judges and setting a time frame for the disposal of cases.”



The Taliban have demanded Shariah law in Swat and the surrounding region.

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THE WALI OF SWAT

Wali Miangul Jahan Zeb, the last Wali of Swat, died on September 14.

His twenty-year tenure as ruler of the principality, from 1949 to 1969, is now viewed as having been the Golden Age of Swat. With energy and passion he supervised the building of schools, hospitals, and roads, and performed a multitude of other tasks for the benefit of his people.

Swat — on the North West Frontier — was envied for many things, but perhaps it was alone in being completely free of practising lawyers. The Wali heard all cases, perhaps as many as eighty a day, and his judgment was final.

When Pakistan was created in 1947 the principality willingly acceded to it. Two years later, the old Wali, Badshah Sahib, stepped down in favour of his son, Jahan Zeb, and returned to a life of prayer.

The new Wali dealt with affairs of state personally. He was known to deal with hundreds of files in a day, and was prepared to listen to any of his subjects. Supplicants had only to send in their cards.

To the end, he remained a confirmed and unabashed Anglophile: in dress, deportment and behaviour. His three-course meals were standard English fare, starting with Mulligatawny soup and ending with apple pudding. His appearance was Westernised — cleanshaven, felt hats, ties and English suits. But he never missed one of the five daily prayers or a fast during the month of fasting.

He lived according to a set

and unbending schedule. He was a forceful personality.

The Wali remained aloof from Pakistan politics, although he maintained important connections through his family, some of whom sat in that country's assemblies. When he handed Swat over to Pakistan, in 1969, he voluntarily surrendered his offices, land and transport.

The only regret that he was known to have expressed about the handing over, with sorrow in his voice, was the indiscriminate cutting down of the olive trees after they became government property. He had imported them from Italy and had tended them with care.

Alas, since its absorption by the state, law and order in Swat has deteriorated, with lootings, kidnappings and murder more common. The world of the twentieth-century is everywhere symbolised by the presence of the video-cassette recorder and a rifle in almost every home.

In the eyes of his people, in an age of pygmies, a giant has just passed away.