

Where the Taleban Train

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Quetta serves as training ground and staging post for insurgents on their way to Afghanistan. The turbans in black or white, the long beards and the omnipresent "pirhan-tunbon", the baggy trousers and long shirts that are the traditional Afghan dress, tell me I'm in Afghanistan in the late Nineties, during the Taleban regime.

But this is 2006, and I am in Quetta in Pakistan.

Quetta, the capital of the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, lies about 200 kilometres southeast of Kandahar, across a porous border. Many of my fellow countrymen have made the journey here. In fact, some sections of the city seem to be populated almost entirely by Taleban who fled after the United States-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.

Now they lie in wait in Quetta, plotting their return.

Over the last year, Kandahar has seen an alarming rise in suicide bombings and attacks on troops and government installations. In the past three months alone, there have been more than 20 acts of violence, leaving dozens dead, hundreds wounded, and an entire province terrorised.

Quetta provides a ready supply of young men prepared to wreak havoc in Afghanistan, local observers tell me. There are eight major madrassas or Muslim religious schools in Quetta, each with over 1,000 students or "taleban" in the original sense of the word. In addition, there are hundreds of private madrassas, some with just 100 students, often occupying unmarked, rented houses.

It is these private schools that are a major source of the fighters who are now carrying out insurgent operations inside Kandahar, according to these observers.

One 23-year-old madrassa student, wearing the characteristic black turban of the "taleb", spoke to me on condition of anonymity.

"I am preparing for jihad here, until I am sent to Afghanistan," he said. "Jihad is my duty and martyrdom my hope."

Another Taleb, 25-year-old Saadullah, explained why he had decided to wage jihad in his homeland.

"I was recruited by one of my friends who told me terrible things about the Afghan government," he said. "I was also told that the Americans were always abusing people, killing them, going into their homes and insulting their religion."

Mullahs did their part, too, he added, preaching fiery sermons against the Afghan government and the

American occupiers during Friday prayers.

Saadullah said he was dispatched on a mission to Kandahar to fight both Afghan and foreign troops.

"I was to carry out a suicide attack on an Afghan National Army base in Kandahar," he said.

But at the border, the friend who was supposed to be accompanying him on the mission gave him 30 US dollars, wished him luck, and headed back to Quetta.

"I thought, 'Why am I to die while you go back to Quetta?'" Saadullah recalled. "Why are these people not doing jihad themselves? They're just taking advantage of the emotions of young people. They are liars.

"I came back and I will never have anything to do with them again."

With Pakistani police a rare sight in much of this city, Quetta residents say that the Taleban operate with impunity. They run offices and openly recruit candidates for insurgent operations in Kandahar.

One resident called Abdullah, 40, said the city contains a number of prominent Taleban leaders such as military commanders Mullah Dadullah and Mullah Abdul Ali Dubandi.

"The whole world knows that the Taleban are trained in Pakistan but they ignore it. The Taleban are all over Quetta," he said.

When you walk through the streets of Quetta, you hear Taleban religious songs blaring out of music stores. These incendiary chants, called "tarana", call on youths to join the jihad, kill infidels and repel the occupiers. Such recordings were banned a few years ago, but now they are back.

"Pakistani police used to close down shops that played Taleban songs, but now no one is afraid. The mullahs are very strong," said one shop owner.

A bookseller who did not want to be named said, "The Taleban are putting out magazines. These publications used to be banned, but now they're published openly and we sell them in our stores."

The magazines, like the songs, contain open calls to violence.

"When you read them, you just want to grab a gun and go to jihad," said the bookseller.

Mullahs here openly incite their followers to attack the current Afghan government. In Friday sermons, they encourage the congregation to join the struggle.

“These attacks should continue. Our struggle is legal. We want to install an Islamic regime in Afghanistan,” said one mullah in the Chawlo Bawlo area of the city.

Some city residents claim that the Pakistani military is playing a role in training the would-be insurgents.

“The Pakistani military headquarters in Quetta is the main Taliban training base,” said Tariq, 31, a resident of the Askari Park area. “I’ve seen with my own eyes that Taliban were taken there for training. One of my relatives was among them.”

Military officials refused to comment on the allegation. Governor Owai Ahmad Ghani, speaking on Pakistani television, flatly denied that the Taliban were operating in Quetta and rejected claims that Pakistan was interfering in Afghanistan.

“The Afghan government is weak. It can’t control the remote areas of its country, so it accuses Pakistan of meddling in its affairs,” he said.

Taliban spokesman Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, in an exclusive interview with IWPR, said the stories of Taliban bases inside Pakistan were just propaganda.

“People think Pakistan is our friend, but it is not true,” he said. “Pakistan is an ally of America, not of the Taliban.”

The Taliban had no need of foreign bases, he insisted, adding, “The Taliban are sons of Afghanistan. They are in Afghanistan and they will fight in Afghanistan.”

But Afghan officials remain convinced that Pakistan is serving as a major operations base for the increasingly frequent insurgent attacks that threaten to destabilise the southern part of their country.

In mid-February, Afghan president Hamed Karzai led a high-ranking delegation to Pakistan, telling officials there that Afghanistan would no longer tolerate support for terrorists from across the border. While he stopped short of outright accusations, Karzai made it clear that he expected Pakistan to make serious efforts to halt the flow of personnel and weapons across the border.

“If [the attacks] don’t stop, the consequences... will be that this region will suffer with us, exactly as we suffer. In the past we suffered alone. This time everybody will suffer with us,” Karzai told reporters.

Assadullah Khalid, governor of Kandahar province, has repeatedly alleged that Pakistan is behind the recent wave of attacks. In particular, he blamed Pakistan for a suicide bombing that killed 27 and wounded 40 in Spin Boldak in January.

“Pakistan is responsible for the past two decades of war,” he said. “Pakistani police are guarding the houses of the Taliban. We have evidence indicating that memorial services for the suicide bombers are

being held in Pakistan.”

Even some Pakistani politicians and analysts agree that their country is heavily involved in creating mayhem on its neighbour’s territory.

“Pakistan does not want stability in Afghanistan,” said Hasel Bizenjo, leader of the Baluch National Party, which represents ethnic Baluchis. “Pakistan wants Afghanistan under its influence.”

Awrangzeb Kasi, a Pakistani political analyst in Quetta, said he believes that there are special terrorist training camps in Pakistan.

“There have been terrorist camps in Pakistan for 26 years, where Inter Services Intelligence [ISI] provides training” he said. “The Pakistani government is always saying that it supports peace in the region, and that it will arrest al-Qaeda leaders, but it is really not doing anything.”

Abdul Rahim Mandokhel, the Quetta-based deputy leader of Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami, an ethnic Pashtun party in Pakistan, agrees.

“It is clear that these terrorists are trained and supported by Islamabad,” he said. “Pakistan can stop these terrorists, but it doesn’t want to.”

Abdullah Shahin is a freelance reporter in Kandahar.

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