

Geography In The News™

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PAKISTAN'S TROUBLED CORNER

One of the world's most lawless territories exists in Pakistan's northeast corner. Known as North and South Waziristan, this mountainous territory has never been fully conquered by any country. It now shelters a hodge-podge of radical Islamic zealots and terrorists, including key members of al-Qaida and the Taliban.

Waziristan (WAH-zir-eh-STAN) is a rugged mountainous area of about 4,473 square miles (11,585 sq. km) located in Pakistan and bordering Afghanistan. Its total area is only about the size of 11 average U.S. counties. Waziristan is located south of the ancient road through the Kyber Pass that connects Pakistan and Afghanistan and west of the Indus River valley. This is an isolated region of high mountains, steep slopes and narrow valleys, penetrated mostly by narrow tracks and trails.

As part of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Waziristan has long been a problem for its neighbors. Isolation has strengthened the Waziri's tribal culture, creating opposition to outside influences and intense rivalries between subgroups.

Waziristan was an independent tribal territory from 1893 until 1947, when it became a part of Pakistan. During these intervening years when Pakistan was part of the British Empire, the Waziri tribes were a continuous problem as they raided adjacent territories in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their reputation as fierce

fighters, refusal of outside governance and intense tribal loyalties has created a perfect safe haven for radical groups.

The population of Waziristan is estimated only at about 800,000, but there has been a recent influx of outsiders consisting of al-Qaida, Taliban, Pakistani militants and foreign fighters. These outsiders have changed the complexity of tribal culture, now beginning to create conflict within the scattered towns and villages.

The United States and its allies in the war on terrorism in Afghanistan have depended on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's control over the country's border region. When major al-Qaida figures escaped from Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion, they fled eastward through the high mountains into Waziristan.

Following the invasion of Afghanistan in spring 2003, President Musharraf's army was reluctant to enter Waziristan,

especially when civilians were injured or killed, as when 83 civilians were killed in a Pakistani air strike.

Subsequently, in September 2006, the Pakistani military signed a peace accord with the tribal leaders of Waziristan, promising to remove roadblocks and stop patrols. In return, the Waziris promised to stop cross-border raids into Afghanistan, according to *Time* magazine (April 2, 2007). But raids by al-Qaida and the Taliban into Afghanistan did not stop, and suicide bombings and ambushes actually increased threefold. More recently, in March 2007, 800 Waziri tribal leaders promised to refuse shelter to anyone suspected of terrorist activities, according to *USA Today* (March 27, 2007).

Although President George W. Bush sent Vice President Dick Cheney to Pakistan in early 2007 to convince Musharraf to intervene again in Waziristan, Musharraf was reluctant to do so.

In part, this stems from his very narrow civilian political support and his need for loyalty from his military commanders.

But another variable is now in play in Waziristan, as Pakistani militants, al-Qaida and the Taliban are increasingly taking control of the region from the Waziris. The lawless outsiders are threatening the Waziri population through assassinations, beheadings and kidnappings.

Such threats and acts are leading to some open opposition from the Waziris, as local populations increasingly are resisting. Open gunfights have recently been reported between the militant outsiders and the Waziri tribesmen. Nonetheless, Waziri opposition to the Pakistani government and the United States is powerful and the militants are extremely well armed. With no place else to go to seek safe haven, it is likely

that the militants will fight to the death before they are pushed out of Waziristan.

The winds of politics and war constantly change.

And that is *Geography in the News*™. April 27, 2007. #882.

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Pakistan's Troubled Terrain



Sources: Baker, Aryn, "The truth about Talibanistan," *Time Magazine*, April 2, 2007; http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_22-3-2004_pg7_16; and "Pakistan: Tribesmen Promise to Shun Militants," *USA Today* March 27, 2007.

given the tribal history and geography of the region. As al-Qaida moved in, however, the United States pressured Musharraf to gain control. Musharraf used an estimated 80,000 troops and had some initial successes at destroying terrorist training camps and capturing terrorists, sometimes supported by the U.S. military and covert operations. Increasingly, however, Waziris resented the outside intervention,