

September 08, 2009

Militants Attack Students In Pakistan, Four Killed



Pakistani soldiers with alleged militants, arrested during an operation in the tribal region of Khyber

PESHAWAR, Pakistan (Reuters) -- Taliban militants attacked a group of high-school students on their way to school in northwest Pakistan, killing four of them and wounding three, a government official said.

The students were apparently attacked because they were minority Shi'ite Muslims. Taliban militants are from the majority Sunni community and attack Shi'a as part of their strategy to fight the government.

"They opened...fire on the students and we have reports of four deaths," said Khaista Gul, an official in the

administration of the Orakzai ethnic-Pashtun tribal region, where the attack took place.

Tribesmen retaliated after the attack and the two sides were fighting, said residents of the area near the town of Kalaya.

Government aircraft attacked militants in a village, 30 km (20 miles) east of Kalaya, killing six of them and destroying four hideouts, said another government official, Sajjad Khan.

Pakistani Taliban have stepped up attacks across the northwest since mid-2007, raising concern about the nuclear-armed U.S. ally's stability.

Militants in northwest Pakistan also support the Afghan Taliban and many cross over the largely unguarded border to fight U.S.-led foreign forces there.

Pakistani security forces have had some success against the Taliban in parts of the northwest this year and the chief of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, was killed in a U.S. missile strike last month.

Orakzai is a stronghold of Hakimullah Mehsud, who has been appointed the new Pakistani Taliban chief.

Pakistani and U.S. officials said the militants were in disarray after Baitullah was killed and attacks appeared to tail off slightly though they have been picking up again over the past two weeks.

Twenty-two Pakistani border guards were killed in a suicide bomb attack at the main border crossing with Afghanistan in the Khyber tribal region, another Hakimullah stronghold, on August 27.

Pakistani security forces launched an offensive against militants in Khyber last week and nearly 120 insurgents have been killed, according to officials.

Independent casualty figures are not available.

In another incident, gunmen kidnapped a Greek man after killing a police guard in the northern Chitral region on the Afghan border, police said.

They did not identify the man but said he had been working on a cultural project in the remote

Kalash valley since 2001.

While Chitral has been generally peaceful, it is opposite the insurgency-plagued Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nuristan. An Afghan government adviser visiting the Pakistani region was kidnapped there last year.

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