

## Pakistan says fence will tighten security along Taliban-haunted Afghan frontier

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**ALWARA MANDI, Pakistan: Protected from frostbite by thick rubber boots, the Pakistani soldiers shivering on these remote mountains on the Afghan frontier know that when the snow melts their job will only get harder. Taliban fighters will return - and find ways to slip past them to attack Afghan and foreign forces on the other side.**

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Under international pressure to stop a Taliban spring offensive that threatens Afghanistan, Pakistan is planning to fence small sections of this vast rugged frontier, despite widespread skepticism that it will be effective.

Pakistan's wild tribal belt has been a refuge for Taliban and al-Qaida militants since the U.S.-led invasion that ousted the hardline militia from Afghanistan at the end of 2001. But over the past year, an alarming escalation in violence has raised concern on whether Pakistan is doing enough to contain the insurgents.

A view of jagged terrain makes plain the formidable challenge.

Today in Asia ' Pacific

"It's easy to cross," said Maj. Mohammed Fazl, a 35-year-old commander of a clutch of lookouts on a frigid pass through the forested mountains. "There is a lot of cover and if they are in a valley it's hard to pick them up. They know the ground very well, because this is where they are from."

Stung by the mounting criticism, President Gen. Pervez Musharraf this month announced plans to fence 35 kilometers (22 miles) on the 2,450-kilometer (1,470-mile) border. At the weekend, the Pakistan military ferried journalists to see the badlands of North Waziristan where several sections of the barrier are to go up.

Atop a redbrick fort near a notorious guerrilla infiltration route at the hamlet of Alwara Mandi, Maj. Gen. Azhar Ali Shah swung his arm from right to left to indicate the 14.5-kilometer (9-mile) stretch across a barren plain between two mountains where the fence will run. Officials say construction will soon begin.

It lies one ridge away from U.S. forward operating base Tillman in Afghanistan's Paktika province that the American military says comes under regular attack.

Shah said the fence would help stop militants, but could not guarantee it would seal the border.

"There could be areas where they go through unobserved, but we have made it very, very difficult for them," he said.

Pakistani officials say the barriers will help secure areas not visible from 900 pre-existing posts along the vast frontier, or will block known insurgent paths. Tripwires, boobytraps and patrols are planned to stop insurgents from simply cutting a hole in the fence.

A second phase foresees using both fencing and mines to secure 250 kilometers (150 miles) of border further south in Baluchistan province.

Musharraf defends the plan by pointing to the Indian fence on the cease-fire line that divides Kashmir, or to the U.S. barrier against illegal immigrants from Mexico. But some experts say those examples only demonstrate the tactic's ineffectiveness.

"The effect is usually very short-term because those who wish to cross the border are almost always able to find a way round," said Christian Le Miere, an analyst at Jane's Country Risk in London.

Patrolling and maintaining fences and minefields will be difficult and expensive, Le Miere added.

Embattled Afghan President Hamid Karzai complains that the plan would unfairly divide families living on both sides of the frontier, which cuts through ethnic Pashtun territories. Mines will kill civilians, both he and the U.N. have warned.

Karzai also has accused Pakistan of secretly supporting the Taliban-led guerrillas - allies of Pakistan until its volte-face following the Sept. 11 attacks - and says fencing the border misses the point: that Taliban and al-Qaida militants continue to find secure refuge in Pakistan's tribal areas.

"We appreciate that Pres. Musharraf ... has recognized the threat posed by cross-border terrorist excursions into Afghanistan and is intending to do more," Said

Tawad, Afghanistan's ambassador to the United States, wrote in an article published in the Wall Street Journal this month. "However, the border is not where the problem lies. Terrorist sanctuaries in Pakistan are the real threat to regional stability and global security."

Robert Oakley, a former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, suspects that retired commanders and some serving agents of Pakistan's ISI intelligence service, which helped the Taliban seize power in Afghanistan in the 1990s, are still supporting them.

"But the biggest problem has been the tendency by the Pakistani army, ISI and police to look the other way at Taliban networks," particularly in Baluchistan, said Oakley, now a consultant with the International Defense University in Washington.

There have been persistent reports and allegations of Taliban militants operating freely in Baluchistan and that the hardline militia's supreme leader, Mullah Omar, is in the provincial capital, Quetta.

Musharraf acknowledged earlier this month that outgunned Pakistani guards have sometimes "turned a blind eye" to bands of guerrillas crossing the border. However, he angrily dismissed the charge of collusion, claiming that hundreds of Pakistani troops have died in operations against al-Qaida and pro-Taliban militants in the tribal areas.

Karzai, Pakistani officials say, is trying to obscure how Taliban militants were gaining ground in their southern Afghan heartland because the U.S.-backed government there has failed to deliver security and badly needed reconstruction.

They also complain that the Afghan National Army and NATO have relatively few border posts of their own.

In North Waziristan, Musharraf's government has shifted its emphasis from bloody search-and-destroy raids to using promises of financial aid to persuade tribal leaders to rein in extremists.

Some U.S. officials are alarmed at that policy, reporting a surge in crossborder attacks since Islamabad signed a peace deal with tribal leaders and pro-Taliban militants in North Waziristan in September.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Friday there had been "some disappointments" with that plan, though the Bush administration has been publicly supportive of Musharraf. The Pakistani military says there is no evidence of a surge - but Maj. Gen. Shah acknowledged that it would take years to dry up support for the Taliban in the Pashtun tribal regions, where every family living in fortress-like compounds is armed. "Some teenagers who have nothing to do idolize these people," Shah said. "The religious feeling is there, and firing a weapon is no problem."

