

Pakistani PM extends talks offer to militants

Pakistan's newly elected Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gillani Saturday called upon the pro-Taliban militants in the country's tribal areas to lay down arms and hold talks with the government.

He also vowed to restore about 60 senior judges deposed by President Pervez Musharraf, a move that could further cloud the political future of the embattled leader.

Laying out his government's policy in the parliament for its first 100 days, Gillani asked the pro-Taliban militants to give up violence and join mainstream politics.

'Unfortunately some people used terrorism as a way of expression (against dictatorship). But now there is a democratic government in the country and we request these people to give up terrorism,' he said.

Before his speech, Gillani asked parliament for a vote of confidence as required by the constitution for a new prime minister, but with no one objecting to his appointment - including all the opposition parties - a unanimous vote of confidence was declared.

'We are ready to hold talks with all those people who will lay down their arms,' he said.

Pakistan's tribal areas have been safe havens for Al Qaeda and Taliban militants who use the region to launch cross border attacks on NATO-led international forces fighting in Afghanistan.

But they also began targeting Pakistani forces when Musharraf sent around 90,000 troops to curb militant activities, mainly under US pressure. More than 1,000 people, many of them security personnel, have died over the last 12 months.

Gillani's offer exhibits the new government's desire to distance itself from Musharraf's heavy-handed policies in the tribal areas by opening dialogue with rebels on one hand and starting development projects and social reforms in the area on the other.

The statement came only days after two senior US officials held meetings with politicians, the military leadership and Musharraf to get assurances from the new government that Musharraf's policies regarding terrorism will not be drastically changed.

Gillani said that despite offering negotiations to the rebels, the new government would remain committed to its endeavour against the menace of terrorism.

'Fighting terrorism is our top priority. As a result of the terrorism so many of our children, men and women have lost their lives,' he said.

The militants have not yet given any response to Gillani's offer, but Islamists cautiously welcomed it while demanding a withdrawal of troops from the tribal areas prior to the dialogue.

'A conducive environment is a prerequisite to successful negotiations, but a conducive environment is impossible until the ongoing military operation in the region is halted,' said Maulana Fazalur Rehman, lawmaker and leader of Jamiat Ulma-e-Islam.

In another significant development, Gillani pledged to restore former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and dozens of other justices Musharraf had removed in a bid to prevent the Supreme Court from ruling against his presidential election for a new term.

'Our government will play its role in the independence of judiciary and in the restoration of judges,' he said.

'In this regard, we have taken our first step,' he added, in a reference to the release of six of senior judges, including Chaudhry, on his order earlier this week.

Partners in the coalition government have agreed on reinstating the deposed judges by a parliamentary resolution, and to replace the judges Musharraf installed in the Supreme Court under an emergency order Nov 3.

Once restored, the independent justices can revoke the approval by the existing judges of Musharraf's presidential vote, leaving the embattled president no choice but to quit.

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