

US army commander in Afghanistan to discuss terrorism with Pakistan

Newly-appointed US military commander in Afghanistan General David D. McKiernan will visit Islamabad Friday to hold talks with Pakistani officials about militancy in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, official sources said.

Sources said the American general will meet military and political leaders to review the situation in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). The Dawn daily had Tuesday reported that local Taliban are planning to take control of major cities in the region.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani chaired a high level meeting and authorised Army Chief Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani to take appropriate measures to control terrorism in the tribal areas. The government is already holding negotiations with the Taliban, who are increasing their influence among the people in NWFP.

'With militants knocking at the gates of the capital of the NWFP, even the more circumspect government and police officials now grudgingly concede that Peshawar, too, could fall in a few months,' the Dawn said in its report, which was widely carried by the international media.

'Yes, the American commander is coming to Pakistan but it is not because of the Dawn report, rather he will be here to interact with the Pakistani leadership,' said an official.

He said the government has also approached the former NWFP ruling alliance of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), which is holding negotiations with Taliban leaders based in Pakistan.

The official said that although the government was worried about the situation in the NWFP, 'the situation is not that bad'. He said Pakistani forces will never allow anyone to use its territory for terrorism in any other country.

'We are talking to the local leaders to take them into confidence regarding operations against any foreigners who may be present in Pakistan,' he said.

The local media has also reported of a gradual loss of territory to the Taliban, kidnapping of Christians from the biggest teaching hospital in Peshawar and speculations that declaration of a state of red alert in Peshawar was on the cards.

He said that in Wednesday's meeting leaders decided to meet the challenge by 'political engagement of the people through their elected representatives, tribal elders and local influentials'.

In addition to the political process, the participants agreed that 'large-scale development, economic empowerment and selective use of military force will be the other prongs of the strategy', the official said.

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