

Pakistan militant commander ready for talks

A tribal council mediating between Pakistani authorities and Islamic rebels Saturday said a powerful militant commander has agreed to hold negotiations to end the military action in the Khyber tribal district in the northwest.

The government sent in hundred of paramilitary forces backed by tanks, artillery and armoured vehicles to the town of Bara last week, foreseeing the threat of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) capital Peshawar falling to the Lashkar-e-Islam militant group.

The offensive was put on hold Friday when local elders volunteered to hold talks with the group's chief, Mangal Bagh, who along with hundreds of his men had retreated to remote Tirah valley in the rugged mountain territory of Khyber.

'It's a great success that the process of reconciliation has begun,' one of the mediators Haji Shaukat told journalists in Peshawar, where the council was expected to apprise government functionaries of its dialogue with Bagh.

'If there is sincerity, God willing the negotiations will prove successful,' Shaukat said.

According to him, the authorities have given an assurance that the military action will remain suspended as long as the talks continue.

However, the Frontier Corps (FC) paramilitary forces have identified militant targets in the Khyber district which would be taken out if peaceful means fail.

Troops have so far detained 92 'criminals' and destroyed 12 buildings used by three local militant groups, including the banned Lashkar-e-Islam. Large caches of weapons were also seized.

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