

Pakistan army seizes Fazlullah's headquarters in Swat

The Pakistan Army Thursday seized the headquarters of a radical Muslim cleric whose armed followers have been fighting the government to impose Taliban-style Islamic law in the country's restive Swat valley region.

Hundreds of troops, backed by helicopter gunships, swept unopposed into the Imam Dheri area of the country's northwest, taking a religious school used by the firebrand cleric Maulana Fazlullah as a command centre.

He had also set up a pirate FM radio station there, through which he regularly urged the public to carry out suicide attacks against security forces.

'Our troops have complete control over Fazlullah's headquarters and the surrounding area,' said Army spokesman Major-General Waheed Arshad. He said troops also demolished the cleric's nearby house, after demands by local residents.

Prior to launching the operation, the military cleared the area of landmines and booby traps, which militants had laid before retreating into the nearby mountains in recent days. They vowed to continue a guerrilla war against the government.

'We have changed our strategy and gone underground to prevent the civilian population from suffering losses,' Maulana Sirajuddin, a militant spokesman, said Wednesday in an audio taped message sent to the local media.

He warned the people to avoid military installations and security checkpoints, which he said would be targeted.

Clashes erupted in the valley in late October when an alarmed President Pervez Musharraf sent additional troops to rein in Fazlullah's 5,000 heavily armed followers, who were reportedly being aided by Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters.

Initially, the rebels seized dozens of villages and at least three major towns in Swat, a popular tourist destination only four hours' drive from the capital Islamabad.

Arshad said six weeks of clashes left more than 230 militants, 20 civilians and 15 security personnel dead.

(© IANS / India eNews)