

## Sharif's failed chance to get serious with the Taliban.

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By Ahmed Rashid.

Just when Pakistanis, foreign diplomats and the world were bracing themselves for a “let’s get serious” speech in which finally – finally – after months of dithering and delay Prime Minister [Nawaz Sharif](#) would announce an offensive against the murderous Pakistani Taliban, he stunned everyone by offering the insurgent group another period of grace for talks.

A few hours before the prime minister addressed parliament on January 29, the Taliban proudly claimed to have killed three and wounded 11 paramilitary soldiers in Karachi. Earlier in January, Karachi’s senior police officer was killed in a carefully planned bomb blast. Large parts of the 20m-strong megalopolis are now under control of the Taliban, whose traditional abode used to be 1,500 miles to the north.

Direct attacks on the army have intensified. On September 20, a Taliban suicide bomber posing as a rubbish collector had the gall to attack the heavily guarded army headquarters in Rawalpindi, killing seven soldiers and five civilians, and injuring 34 soldiers. A day earlier 24 soldiers were killed in a brazen attack on a garrison in Bannu in northwest [Pakistan](#).

Elsewhere militant Sunni group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which claims allegiance to the Taliban, has killed hundreds of Shias. In January, 22 Shia pilgrims were killed in a suicide attack near Quetta. Other minorities, such as Christians, have been targeted in mass killing by all the groups.

Pakistan is going through a bout of unprecedented, unrelenting violence that has gripped not just the northwest, where the Taliban reside, but the entire country.

“Militant groups ... operate with virtual impunity across Pakistan as law enforcement officials either turn a blind eye or appear helpless to prevent attacks,” says [Human Rights Watch in its annual report](#). Published in late January, the report says Taliban attacks now amount to war crimes.

More than 20 [polio vaccinators](#) – many of them young female nurses – have been killed by the Taliban. Bill Gates, whose foundation is helping fund the campaign to make Pakistan polio-free, has suggested suspending his program. “The Pakistan violence is evil,” he told reporters in New York on January 22.

Since coming to power seven months ago, Mr Sharif has offered at least three times to hold peace talks with the Taliban, which has just as often declined them. However, many people thought this time was going to be different.

There were daily meetings with an angry and frustrated army chief urging him to take the decision to act but also insisting that the government mobilise public support and take ownership of any military campaign. Briefings by Mr Sharif’s party, the Pakistan Muslim League, were overwhelmingly in favour of a military operation. Foreign dignitaries, including Nick Clegg, British deputy prime minister, insisted Pakistan was threatened by extremism.

Meanwhile, such was the hype and conviction that an offensive was in the offing that 13,000 tribesmen and their families fled from North Waziristan, where it was expected to take place.

But this time was no different. Mr Sharif repeated the same mantra, asking the Taliban to hold talks, appointing a committee of four loyalists – two of them journalists – to start the talks process. At the same time he gave no details as to where the state stood: the red lines, the time frame, the framework for talks or the mandate for the committee. It was merely another vague offer of ceasefires and talks if the Taliban were only to oblige the government by answering.

In contrast the Taliban has never deviated from what it wants: destruction of the state, the creation of a caliphate and the imposition of Islamic law.

Several things need to be in place before the government can go after the extremists. The powerful army wants the civilians to take political responsibility for any offensive and stand firm for the expected Taliban blowback, which will come in the shape of stepped-up suicide bombings. Mr Sharif must mobilise and unite the public and media on a war footing. The government has to set up relief camps in preparation for tribespeople fleeing the fighting. The army and the government have to be on one page.

Mr Sharif has given no hint that he is prepared to undertake any of these important prerequisites, which makes it even more doubtful that he is serious about an offensive or even talks. Talks from a position of strength, or with the threat of war, may convince some Taliban that it is time to talk. But hoping for a dialogue at a time when the state is failing to put the least pressure on the Taliban, or refusing to set conditions that maintain the sovereignty of the state, smells of surrender and weakness.

Pakistan’s real crisis has always been about its ruling elite, military and civilian, which has refused to take the necessary steps to become a modern democratic state. Wiping out extremism is the first prerequisite for economic and social development. Bilawal Bhutto, son of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, put it succinctly on Twitter, when he said Pakistan needs a Winston Churchill not a series of Neville Chamberlains. The lack of leadership and the

failure of vision remain the most haunting aspects of today's nuclear armed Pakistan.

*The writer is the author of many books, his latest being 'Pakistan on the Brink: the Future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West'*