

Pro-Taliban cleric under siege from troops

by UPI

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan -- The Pakistani military, after taking heavy casualties in northwest Swat valley, Friday attacked the hideout of a pro-Taliban cleric. The BBC, quoting local police, reported that Pakistani troops had surrounded an area described as the stronghold of Maulana Fazlullah but it wasn't known if the cleric was inside. Swat, a popular tourist spot, has increasingly come under the control of Fazlullah and his Islamic brigade, who have been attacking Pakistani troops sent there to regain control of the region. At least 17 soldiers were killed in a bomb attack Thursday in the area. "Heavy weapons are being fired and there have been more than a dozen explosions. I can see black smoke rising from the hills," a local journalist told the BBC news Web site. The fighting reportedly started after the troops took up hilltop positions above the cleric's hideout. Violence has increased in the region after Pakistan dispatched more than 2,000 troops to contain the growing influence of Fazlullah, who has been broadcasting messages of suicide bombings and jihad through a clandestine radio transmitter.

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