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## Dangerous deals

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AS THE snows melt in Afghanistan, the fighting season beckons; across the border in Pakistan, however, it is the season for making peace deals. After winning an election in February the coalition government, led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), announced plans to talk to militants. Talks have indeed taken place, to the chagrin of the American administration. But the civilians had little to do with them.

The PPP and its main coalition partner, Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League, have been far too busy for duty in the "war on terror". They have been bickering instead over their unfulfilled pledge to reinstate judges sacked by President Pervez Musharraf. On the frontier, Mr Musharraf, army chief until November 2007, still calls the shots. It was he who signed a 15-point peace plan cobbled together by a military-intelligence agency and the governor of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) before the election, and approved by the new civilian government last month.

The army and the militants, both badly bruised from vicious fighting, have observed an unofficial ceasefire for more than a month while officials attempt to string a series of "secret" deals together across the lawless tribal agencies. They are close to signing a deal with tribal elders acting for Baitullah Mehsud, the overall leader of the assorted Pakistani Taliban outfits. The CIA has named Mr Mehsud as the prime suspect in the murder last December of Benazir Bhutto, a former prime minister. It accuses him of training suicide-bombers. On April 25th he distributed fliers ordering supporters to end hostilities or be "hung upside down in public".

The deal stipulates an end to militant activity, the expulsion of foreign fighters, an exchange of prisoners and the gradual withdrawal of the army from South Waziristan. But similar deals have foundered in the past. In North Waziristan, for example, a 2006 agreement led to a tripling of cross-border infiltration. Officials say the new pact ties in more tribes. In South Waziristan the methods for dealing with "violations" have been tightened.

But the flaws are obvious: the draft is silent about militants' cross-border forays into Afghanistan; and it is not clear how ineffective tribal elders can wield influence over well-armed militants. Western diplomats say that infiltration has doubled over the past month compared with the same time last year, and is a particular problem from Bajaur.

According to a senior Western diplomat, there is a lingering attachment between elements of Pakistan's establishment and Mr Mehsud and other leading Islamist extremists. The militants holding Tariq Azizuddin, Pakistan's ambassador to Afghanistan, who was kidnapped in February in the Khyber Pass, say that in return for freeing him they want the release of three suspects accused of murdering Benazir Bhutto and a former Taliban defence minister, Mullah Obaidullah.

The secular party that governs the North-West Frontier Province, the Awami National Party, is trying to pacify its own area. It has released a senior pro-Taliban Pakistani militant, Sufi Mohammad, whose banned faction has pledged to renounce violence. Khalid Aziz, a retired senior bureaucrat, has helped draw up a plan that includes boosting the province's police force by 14,000 officers and rehabilitating 12,000 former militants. But he says NWFP's success is greatly dependent on the tribal areas. Aftab Sherpao, a former interior minister who has survived two suicide-attacks, says that no plan can work unless it is linked to agreements in Afghanistan. To some observers, including the Americans, it all has an air of inevitable failure.

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