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**World > Terrorism & Security**

posted February 24, 2004, updated 11:00 a.m.

# Osama bin Laden 'surrounded?'

**Reports say bin Laden cornered in northwest Pakistan, but US denies it.**

By [Tom Regan](#) | *csmonitor.com*

The British newspaper, **The Sunday Express**, reported Sunday that Osama bin Laden has been found and is [surrounded by US special forces](#) in an area of northwestern Pakistan, on the border with Afghanistan. Quoting a "well-placed intelligence source" in Washington, the paper says that Mr. bin Laden is traveling with 50 bodyguards, and is being tracked by satellite. Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar is thought to [be with bin Laden](#).

Hostile terrain makes an all-out conventional military assault impossible, so special forces would be used in a "grab and go" style operation.

"US helicopters already sited on the Afghanistan border will swoop in to extricate him," the newspaper says. It claims bin Laden and his men "sleep in caves or out in the open. The area is swept by fierce snow storms howling down from the 10,000 ft-high mountain peaks. Donkeys are the only transport."

US and Pakistani forces downplayed the story, as did some [private intelligence agencies](#) such as **Stratfor**. "As far as the reports of Osama bin Laden's location, I don't take much



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credence in them because if we knew where he was, [we would go get him](#)," said US military spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Bryan Hiltferty Monday in Kabul, Afghanistan. Pakistani military Major General Shaukat Sultan said there is no operation of any kind going on in the area described by the **Sunday Express**.

A spokesman for the Taliban told **Agence-France Presse** Monday that reports of bin Laden's imminent capture, or possible [capture by US forces](#) before the end of the year, are "rubbish." Taliban spokesman Mohammed Saiful Adel says the Al Qaeda leader is still in Afghanistan and is planning further attacks on American interests. "We give you this special message from our leaders and elders to make sure you are not worried about the false propaganda and to inform you they are safe and sound and busy making plans for attacking Americans, their puppets and slaves," he read from a statement.

**The Washington Times** reported Monday, however, that the top-secret US commando team that helped capture Saddam Hussein is heading for Afghanistan. The **Times** says it's the latest sign that [the hunt for bin Laden](#) is coming to a head. The Defense Department says it is moving "Task Force 121" to Afghanistan because its mission in Iraq is basically finished, and that intelligence on the whereabouts of bin Laden is growing.

But the **Los Angeles Times** reports that the CIA is struggling to 'spy' effectively in Afghanistan, and Iraq. A number of the remote bases that the CIA set up in Afghanistan have been [forced to close](#) in recent months because of security concerns. And there are other problems.

There is such a shortage of Arabic speakers and qualified case officers willing to take dangerous assignments that the agency has been forced to hire dozens – if not hundreds – of CIA retirees, and to lean heavily on translators, sources said. The agency has also had to use soldiers for tasks that CIA officers normally perform, sources said.

**CNN** reported Tuesday that Pakistan has [launched a military operation](#) against "foreign terrorists" in the country's tribal regions along the border with Afghanistan. Pakistan has reportedly moved [between 8000 and 10,000 soldiers](#) into the area for the operation, which involves no foreign troops. US special forces troops have operated in this region

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in the past, according to local residents.

The [focal point of the operation](#) at this point, reports the **Asia Times**, is the tribal areas of North and South Waziristan on the Pakistani side, and Paktia and Paktika in Afghanistan. A Pakistani military spokesman said the US and Pakistan are operating on each side of the border in hopes of producing "a hammer-and-anvil approach." The plan would see Pakistan drive Al Qaeda fighters toward US and Afghan forces across the frontier. **Associated Press** reports Tuesday that Pakistan forces have [arrested 20 people](#) so far in the operation.

In an interview with the **Australian Broadcasting Corporation**, leading Afghan analyst Rahimullah Yusufizai, who lives in Peshawar near the Afghan border, says that there is no doubt the tribal areas along the Afghan-Pakistan border are [a place of refuge](#) for the Taliban.

There is support and there are people who would be willing to give them refuge. No, we don't really know how many people have been given refuge, what is their level of importance. And also I can tell you that I don't think there is more than a couple of hundred Arabs left now in this area, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, because there are not more than 1,000 in Afghanistan in any case before September 11.

**The Hindustan Times** reported Tuesday that Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri, said if Bin Laden is caught, he would be [handed over to US forces](#). The amnesty offered by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, where by foreigners surrendering in Pakistan would not be handed over to any power, would not apply to Bin Laden.

While the hunt for Bin Laden intensifies, the **BBC** reports his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has reportedly criticized a French law that includes the [banning of Islamic headscarves](#) in state schools. In a tape delivered to Arab satellite broadcaster, Al Arabiya, Mr. Zawahiri said the decision "shows the grudge the western crusaders have against Islam."

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