

chiefs bringing terror to the world

A large proportion of the population are, by western standards, drug addicts. A World Bank report in 2007 suggested that nearly three-quarters of Yemeni men and a third of women chew khat, a leaf that has an effect similar to amphetamines. This adds to the instability.

Into this morass has waded Al-Qaeda. Of particular concern to western intelligence agencies is the composition of the group's leadership in Yemen.

Said Ali al-Shihri, a Saudi national, spent six years as prisoner number 372 at the US-run Guantanamo detention centre in Cuba after being captured on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in December 2001.

In December 2007, however, he was released into the custody of the Saudi government's "deradicalisation" programme for terrorists, which offered psychological counselling, classes in more moderate

forms of Islam, art therapy and playing sport and video games. The Saudis boasted that the programme had an 80% success rate.

Some 3,000 prisoners have gone through the programme since 2003, and such was the faith in the project that it has been visited by a number of world leaders, including Gordon Brown, who lauded its principles during a visit to the kingdom.

But according to US sources, al-Shihri spent just six to 10 weeks at the rehabilitation facility.

Within days of his release in early 2008, he is believed to have crossed the border into Yemen and began putting into place the building blocks for a new organisation, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which claimed responsibility for the botched suicide bomb attack on a Detroit-bound plane on Christmas Day.

By September 2008, al-Shihri had hooked up with two notorious terrorists who

had escaped from Yemeni jails. Nasir al-Wahayshi was a former secretary to Osama Bin Laden, and Jamal Muhammad Ahmad al-Badawi was the convicted mastermind of the USS Cole bombing that killed 17 American sailors off Yemen in October 2000.

By early last year the group had gained notoriety by orchestrating the kidnap and murder of at least six foreigners in Yemen and was suspected of co-ordinating a failed bombing of the US embassy in Sana'a.

Their ranks had also been swelled by at least three other former Guantanamo detainees.

Last week Pentagon sources admitted that 61 former prisoners at the camp, 12% of the 510 released, have returned to the battlefield.

According to public records, six Yemenis were sent home from Guantanamo in December, and lawyers acting for the detainees say about 35 more have been cleared for

release by an administration task force.

While Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula made headlines at Christmas with its attempted bombing, it has been steadily building its capabilities. Recently it opened a training camp in the south of the country, which is believed to be based in the Al Jaza area in the district of Madiyah in the southern province of Abyan. It houses more than 400 fighters, of whom Yemenis, Saudis and Somalis make up the majority.

Ali al-Ahmed, director of the Institute for Gulf Affairs in Washington, believes Yemen has now become the third-largest haven for Al-Qaeda, and the group there is perhaps the most stable when compared with units in Iraq and south Asia.

"The operating Al-Qaeda group in Yemen now is really the most comfortable and it's probably the best funded," he said. "It's not the best trained [and] it doesn't have

the best talent — that's why it hasn't been able to mount successful attacks. But it will come around in the coming years, and it will become a major threat."

With Yemen apparently on the verge of becoming the world's next failed state and a regional base for Al-Qaeda, a series of US-assisted air and ground assaults have shaken up pockets of the country but, according to experts, the action may not help.

"The US has been growing very concerned about Al-Qaeda in recent years, but it seems as though it is coming rather late to the party," says Gregory Johnsen, a Yemen expert at Princeton University, who contends that the attacks could ultimately prove counterproductive because of the civilian casualties involved.

Indeed the strikes have started to look like more a boon for Yemen's Al-Qaeda revival, according to politicians.

"The Al-Qaeda threat in Yemen is real, but now after this operation in Detroit and the American-backed bombings of tribal lands to root out so-called terrorists, it will be greater," said Mohammed Quhtan, of Yemen's opposition Islamist al-Islah party.

"Al-Qaeda will be able to recruit a lot more young people, at least from the tribes that were hit. And it will have reasonable grounds to attract more people from Abyan governorate, and from the Yemeni population in general."

That is a frightening prospect for a country on the brink of collapse. "Yemen is fast becoming the Pakistan in the heart of the Arab world," one western official in Sana'a said. "You have military and government collusion with Al-Qaeda, peace agreements, budding terror camps, and the export of jihad to neighbouring countries. We have all seen this road map before."