

Pakistan intensifies military operations in Afghan border areas

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Responding to pressure from Washington, Pakistan has been engaged in extensive military operations for the last month to prevent groups of armed fighters crossing its border into Afghanistan. Both the US military and the Afghan government had accused Pakistan of failing to take sufficient measures to prevent anti-US forces from conducting hit-and-run raids inside Afghanistan.

According to the Pakistani army, the operation resulted in the capture of 230 so-called Taliban and Al Qaeda suspects during October and the killing of another 10. Ten troops lost their lives. The action, which began on October 2, was coordinated with US occupation forces inside Afghanistan. US helicopter gunships patrolled the Afghan side of the border to cut off any escape.

General Aurakzai, the Pakistani commander of the border forces, claims that the military has now secured control of the crossing points to seven key passes and begun to erect fencing in other border areas. North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) governor Syed Iftikhar Hussain Shah announced that 589 posts had been erected in October to control movement across the border.

Hundreds of Pakistan's elite Quick Response Force, backed by 25 military helicopters, took part in the initial operation. Thousands of additional troops have been deployed throughout the border areas to support the extensive intelligence network and aerial surveillance now in place to prevent cross-border movements.

The Pakistani forces faced tough opposition. The BBC reported a fierce clash in early October during which 18 "Al Qaeda suspects" were arrested and another eight killed. Over the next week, the military destroyed homes and seized vehicles in the Afghan

border town of Angor Adda, producing what the BBC described as "a mixture of anger and amazement" from local tribesmen.

Pakistan insisted that the operation was launched "upon the receipt of credible intelligence about the presence of Al Qaeda remnants". Pakistani officials are trying to track down alleged Al Qaeda financier, Egyptian-born Canadian Ahmed Said Khadr, alias Abu Abdur Rehman, who, they say, may be hiding in the border areas along with Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahri.

None of the Al Qaeda leaders have been captured and it is by no means clear who the Pakistani military has been killing and capturing. According to a government official, Chechens, Uzbeks, Algerians and some Arab-speaking nationals have been among those killed or detained. Four detained women and six children were also "of foreign origin". But no evidence has been offered to support the allegations.

"Al Qaeda and Taliban suspects" is a blanket term applied by the US military to the growing armed opposition inside Afghanistan to the US-backed regime of President Hamid Karzai. Hostility to the US occupation is particularly intense among the Pashtun tribes in the impoverished southeast of the country which have been subject to continuous US military operations for the last two years.

Pakistan has simply taken over the US designation. The population on the Pakistani side of the border is also predominantly Pashtun. Tribesmen have strong ties in both countries and have for decades moved back and forward across a border arbitrarily drawn by the former British colonial rulers of India. Many have been involved in trading and petty smuggling.

Pakistan itself was forced to recognise the special character of its border areas and to grant a form of

political autonomy to the five million people living in the region. The tribes have previously functioned under their own councils, courts and legal system. In fact, Pakistani troops only moved into these areas under pressure from Washington in December 2001 after the US military had launched its offensive against the Taliban regime.

The latest Pakistani operation came after US president Bush bluntly told his Pakistani counterpart General Pervez Musharraf to stop “cross-border infiltration” into Afghanistan during the UN General Assembly in September. An editorial in the *New York Times* editorial commented on September 21 that “America must look for ways to reduce its dependence on General Musharraf”.

Musharraf, who is heavily dependent on US financial and political support, responded almost immediately. Just days after the Pakistani military launched their operation, two top US state department officials—Richard Armitage and Christina Rocca—appeared in Pakistan on October 5. After previously expressing reservations about Musharraf’s willingness to “tackle the Al Qaeda and Taliban,” Armitage hailed the “tremendous effort” now being made.

On October 23-25, Islamabad organised a tour of the frontier regions for diplomats and officials from 17 countries, along with journalists, in order to impress on them that Pakistan was taking action to seal the border. At the major crossing point of Chaman, Pakistan has set up a gate, a series of checkpoints and is building new light towers. The military is also constructing a 40 kilometre long embankment in the same area to prevent border crossings.

In the tribal areas, Pakistani authorities are using threats and bribes to obtain information about “Al Qaeda suspects”. Along with warnings of severe measures for those who refuse to cooperate, the government promised in late October to provide grants to uplift the area. It has established 21 medical camps and five facilities to treat eye diseases and plans to develop 596 kilometres of roads, 18 schools and four colleges.

The facilities are long overdue and have failed to stem the growing hostility among tribesmen to the military presence and Pakistan’s support for the US occupation of Afghanistan. Two elders told the press

that the government had promised “schools, hospitals, water, but none of that has happened. Our pregnant women are dying on the way to the hospital, our children are studying under a tree because there is no school.”

By acceding to US demands, Musharraf is weakening his own political position, particularly in the border areas. The two provinces adjacent to Afghanistan—the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan—are both ruled by coalitions dominated by the Mutahida Majilis-e-Amal (MMA)—an alliance of six Islamic fundamentalist parties. Both the MMA and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) have threatened to launch a political movement in the tribal areas against the army’s operations.

Two years after the US launched its military intervention to topple the Taliban, Afghanistan is dominated by rival warlords, tribal leaders and militia groups each seeking carve out their own sphere of influence. Now the instability induced by the US actions threatens to spill across the border into Pakistan.



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