

US-backed military offensive in Pakistan costs scores of lives

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23 March 2004

A week of fierce fighting between 6,000 heavily-armed Pakistani troops and suspected Islamist militants in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan has resulted in heavy casualties on both sides. The army has surrounded an estimated 400 to 500 fighters entrenched in a number of heavily fortified mud brick structures in South Waziristan and has been pounding the area using artillery, helicopter gunships and combat aircraft.

Just who is resisting is unclear. Late last week Pakistan's military strongman, President Pervez Musharraf, commented that the strong opposition indicated that the army might have trapped a "high value" target. Media speculation based on US and Pakistani military sources focussed initially on key Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri then on Uzbek cleric Qari Tahir Yaldash, an ally of the ousted Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The military has announced the detention of more than 100 people including Arabs, Chechens, Uzbeks and ethnic Uighurs from western China. It is uncertain, however, how many of the fighters are "Al Qaeda" and how many are local tribesmen, hostile to the intervention of the Pakistani army into the autonomous border areas. The military is carrying out DNA testing on the bodies of several of the dead fighters. Claims that Zawahiri or Qari Tahir Yaldash has been trapped or killed are now being downplayed.

The Musharraf regime has a vested interest in capturing or killing a top Al Qaeda figure in order to boost its standing in Washington. Under strong US pressure, more than 70,000 Pakistani troops have been scouring the tribal border areas since February in tandem with a US-led offensive involving more than 10,000 troops against anti-government forces inside Afghanistan.

The entire operation is a desperate attempt by the

Bush administration to produce a public relations coup in the lead up to the US elections by capturing Osama bin Laden or other top Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. Alongside regular US troops, the Pentagon has dispatched special forces units to the area, including Task Force 121, which was credited with Saddam Hussein's capture in Iraq. Last week they were joined by 100 British SAS troops.

US and Pakistani officials have denied any US involvement in the Pakistani military operation, which has already generated protests and threatens to further undermine Musharraf's shaky political position. Washington and Islamabad both insist that no US soldiers are operating inside Pakistan and that US cooperation is limited to the providing of intelligence from satellites, Predator drones and other devices.

However, other evidence indicates that the US military is closely involved in, if not directing events. An article in the British *Telegraph* newspaper revealed that as far back as December, the CIA identified the villages in South Waziristan now under attack as a possible refuge for Zawahiri. Army spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan has admitted that Pakistan troops have been joined by "a dozen or so" US intelligence agents. In the midst of the current offensive, General John Abizaid, head of the US military's Central Command, made an unannounced visit yesterday to Islamabad for what was said to be "routine" talks.

Musharraf is heavily dependent on the Bush administration politically and economically. He received a further boost last week when visiting US Secretary of State Colin Powell announced that Washington had granted Pakistan the status of "major non-NATO ally" which allows greater access to US military technology, defence equipment and training.

But Musharraf's support for Washington's "global war on terrorism" and its occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq has generated widespread opposition inside Pakistan.

The latest offensive has fuelled further anger in the tribal areas, which traditionally have enjoyed a degree of autonomy from Islamabad and have been a virtual no-go area for the army and police. In asserting its authority, the Pakistani military is employing methods of "collective punishment" that hark back to the British colonial period. In comments to the media, Lieutenant General Safdar Hussain, who is in charge of the current operations, singled out the Yargul Khel tribe as responsible for assisting "foreign terrorists." "I'm determined to punish this tribe and make them an example," he declared.

The fighting in South Waziristan is the fiercest of the entire campaign. It erupted last Tuesday when Pakistani forces attempted to detain local tribesmen and encountered strong resistance. At least 15 soldiers and an estimated 26 opposition fighters were killed in the initial battle. The Pakistani military sealed off the area with thousands of troops, but has been unable to end the armed resistance despite the use of air power and artillery.

Thousands of civilians have been forced to flee their homes and a number of men, women and children have been killed. Rahman Wazir, 25, from Wana told the press: "More people are moving than I could imagine. Men and women are crying. They have left their homes and they have left their orchards."

Associated Press gave details of an incident last week in which a 12-year-old boy Din Mohammed was killed by shellfire. His two sisters Haseena, 10, and Asmeena, 2, were treated for shrapnel injuries at the Rehman Medical Complex in Wana. "We were eating lunch and all of a sudden the shelling began and it hit our courtyard. I loved my brother a lot. What did we do to deserve this?" Haseena asked.

The British-based *Independent* reported that two dozen residents were killed on Saturday when five vehicles were fired upon. Locals disputed claims by the military that a bus had been fired on by opposition militants, insisting that a Pakistani helicopter had strafed the vehicle. Zain Ullah said that 12 of his relatives, including five women, had died in the attack and three of his dead cousin's children were injured.

Last weekend dozens of students held a demonstration against the military operation in the town of Dera Ismail Khan. "The government has made this drama for the benefit of the USA," demonstrator Sherbez Ansari told the media. "The result is the tribal people have suffered. We are sure there are no terrorists in our area. No Al Qaeda."

In Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier Province, hundreds of people marched to protest against the US and the civilian casualties caused by the fighting. Demonstrators chanted "Get out, FBI" and "Stop the war in the tribal areas in the name of Al Qaeda."

Tribal leader and MP Maulan Khalil-ur-Rehman pointed out that Washington had backed Al Qaeda and other foreign Islamists during the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. "The 'foreign fighters' living in Wana were heroes of Islam when they were fighting the Soviets, but now we are told by Musharraf and America they are terrorists."

Last Sunday, a gathering of 70 prominent Islamic clerics in Islamabad issued a religious ruling declaring that the operation in South Waziristan was an "unjustified war" by the Pakistan army.

In a bid to stem growing opposition, the Pakistani military agreed to a temporary ceasefire on Monday to allow tribal elders to attempt to broker a deal with the Yargul Khel chiefs. The delegation was to present three government demands: to release 12 soldiers and two government officials; to hand over tribesmen involved in the fighting; and to kick out and help capture foreign fighters.

It is unlikely, however, that these demands will be accepted, making further fighting inevitable.



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