

Hundreds dead in fighting along Afghanistan-Pakistan border

James Cogan
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Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA) and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) have been plunged into the heaviest fighting between government troops and Islamist and Pashtun tribal militants in more than two years. Fierce battles have taken place this week in Bajaur, the northernmost tribal agency, which borders Afghanistan's Konar province. Dozens of fighters on both sides have been killed and tens of thousands of civilians have been forced to flee their homes.

The chief secretary of the FATA, Habibullah Khan, told Agence France-Presse: "We have around 135,000 people who have left their homes there [Bajaur]. We have directed officials in adjoining districts to provide shelter, food and health care to the migrating families. We are setting up more camps to help these people, just like refugees."

The Pakistani military offensive in Bajaur and the tremendous human suffering it is causing are the direct outcome of US pressure on the new civilian government of Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, which took power after elections in February. With increasing heat, the Bush administration and US military commanders have demanded that Gilani order a full-scale crackdown to prevent Afghan guerilla fighters using the FATA as a base for their war against the US and NATO forces occupying Afghanistan.

The Bajaur agency is under the effective control of militants loyal to Maulvi Omar and Faqir Mohammad, the local representatives of the Pakistani Tehrik-e-Taliban movement. It is believed to be one of the main bases for Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami movement, which is fighting the US-led occupation in an alliance with supporters of the former Taliban regime. It is alleged that Al Qaeda members are also hiding out in its rugged terrain.

Several hundred militants from Bajaur are believed to have crossed into Afghanistan on July 13 to attack a newly established American post in the Wanat district of Konar. Nine US soldiers were killed and 15 wounded in one of the costliest days for American forces since the October 2001 invasion.

On August 6, some 200 to 300 troops of the Pakistani paramilitary Frontier Corps made what appears to have been a poorly planned attempt to reoccupy abandoned posts near the town of Loyesam and cut off insurgent routes over the border.

They came under almost immediate attack by heavily armed tribal fighters.

After three days of fighting, the government troops pulled back, leaving behind over 70 dead or captured and several tanks and armoured vehicles. Since last weekend, Taliban fighters have established defensive positions in the villages surrounding the agency capital, Khar. They have reportedly blocked the main highway line linking Bajaur with the adjoining agency of Mohmand and seized the main road to the capital of NWFP, Peshawar.

Reports indicate that the Pakistani military has been pounding the Taliban positions with jet fighters and helicopter gunships throughout the week. Dozens of houses, several mosques and at least one school have been reduced to rubble. On Tuesday, Pakistani officials claimed they had killed a senior Al Qaeda leader, Abu Saeed al-Masri, also known as Mustafa Abu al-Yazid. Yazid was alleged to have played a major role in plotting the September 11 attacks and terrorist operations since.

The claim has not been confirmed and may be an attempt to refute recent US accusations that sections of the Pakistani intelligence services are still assisting Islamic extremists, as they officially did until 2001. Government spokesmen have also downplayed their own losses while claiming that "hundreds" of Taliban militants have been killed. The exact number of casualties from the week's fighting is shrouded by the contradictory reports.

Bajaur is now the third battleground in the Pashtun regions of Pakistan. Fighting was already taking place in the Swat Valley district of NWFP and in areas of the Khyber tribal agency, to the west of Peshawar. The next areas that are likely to be targeted are the agencies of South and North Waziristan—the strongholds of the overall leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud. The area is also the base for the Afghan Taliban warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani. Numerous passes exist in the mountainous region through which his fighters can move into southern Afghanistan.

On Tuesday, Taliban spokesman Maulvi Omar told the Associated Press that the government operations in the Swat Valley and the tribal agencies meant "it is an open war between us and them." The same day, a Taliban bomb destroyed a military van as it left Peshawar. The massive blast hit other

vehicles in the vicinity, killing a five-year-old girl. Nine Pakistani Air Force personnel and civilian employees in the van were killed.

On Thursday, a suicide bomber detonated an explosion outside a police station in the city of Lahore, the capital of Punjab province and far from the front line of the conflict. Seven people were killed. The attack may signal the beginning of a concerted campaign of Islamist bombings targeting Pakistan's major population centres. Last week, nine prospective suicide bombers from South Waziristan were arrested in Lahore in possession of explosive-laden vests and small arms.

The growing violence in Pakistan is an extension of the US military attempt to turn Afghanistan into an American client state in Central Asia. If the insurgent safe havens in Pakistan cannot be closed down, the US and NATO forces occupying Afghanistan face what a British commander referred to as a "generational war"—a conflict lasting for another 20 years and consuming vast resources.

Occupation troops and the Afghan government army and police control the main cities and towns and can secure strategic roads, bridges and landing strips. Insurgents, however, move with relative impunity in the countryside. Large sections of the Pashtun population in southern and eastern Afghanistan openly support the resistance to the US and NATO invaders and provide assistance and information. When necessary, the insurgents can retreat over the border to bases in Pakistan to re-supply, treat their wounded and train new forces.

A classic guerilla war is taking place. Insurgent operations along the major highways linking Kabul with cities in the south and east are creating havoc for the occupation forces. Over recent months, bridges have been destroyed and dozens of supply convoys ambushed. An anonymous manager of a western company contracted to truck supplies to NATO forces told the British *Financial Times* this week: "In the summer months, I would expect to be attacked once or twice a week."

A Kabul-based fuel trader, Matthew Leeming, reported: "The Taliban's new tactics of blowing up bridges between Kabul and Kandahar, forcing convoys to slow down and become softer targets, is causing severe problems to companies trying to supply Kandahar from Kabul." In a major attack in June, a convoy of 50 trucks was virtually destroyed.

Over the past week, at least 20 US and NATO troops have been killed or wounded by roadside bombings, ambushes or suicide bombings in various parts of Afghanistan, though mainly in the provinces that border Pakistan. Three American soldiers were killed on Thursday by an explosion and two more on Friday in a Taliban ambush. For the third month in a row, more US troops have been killed in Afghanistan than in Iraq.

Overall, 573 American soldiers have died in the Afghan theatre since October 2001, with close to 2,500 wounded. Britain has lost 115 dead and Canada 90. In a rare attack in the northern areas of the country, where other NATO countries

provide most of the occupation troops, the first Latvian soldier to die in the war was killed by a roadside bomb on Monday in the province of Faryab.

The desperation of the occupation forces is reflected in the virtually daily killing of Afghan civilians by indiscriminate air strikes or trigger-happy troops at checkpoints. On Tuesday, British soldiers in Helmand province shot dead a man who did not slow down as he approached a road block. The following day, British forces severely wounded three people in a car that tried to overtake a line of traffic.

The occupation forces are now carrying out more than 20 air strikes on alleged but unconfirmed Taliban targets every day in Afghanistan. Afghan officials reported that an attack last Saturday in the province of Kapisa killed 12 civilians and wounded 18 others.

The NATO-commanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) admitted in a press release that at least eight Afghan civilians were killed by helicopter gunships that were called in after an ambush on Australian troops on Monday. ISAF claimed that 25 other people killed by the gunships were all Taliban fighters.

More than 1,000 Afghan civilians have been killed this year as a result of insurgent attacks or by the occupation forces, as well as 1,500 to 2,000 alleged guerillas. As the carnage escalates and the hatred of the Afghan people toward the US-led occupation mounts, so do the calls in the United States for more troops to be sent and for the US military to conduct its own hot pursuits and air strikes over the border into Pakistan. The campaign is being spearheaded by Democratic Party presidential candidate Barack Obama, who has made the escalation of the Afghan war the centre-piece of his foreign policy.

The Pakistani government, fearful of popular opposition to any such incursions, formally denies the US permission to carry out attacks on its territory. The ongoing air strikes on militant camps, however, make clear that covert operations are taking place. On Tuesday evening, an unmanned American Predator surveillance aircraft fired missiles into an alleged Taliban safe-house in South Waziristan, killing at least nine people.

If the Pakistani military proves incapable or unwilling to subjugate the tribal agencies, the next stage of a war that has already dragged on for close to seven years may well be American ground troops crossing the border to attack guerilla safe havens.



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