

In response to US demands: Pakistani military attacks Islamist forces

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The Pakistani government has ordered major military offensives against the Islamist groups in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA), which are allegedly assisting the insurgency against US and NATO forces over the border in Afghanistan. The operations follow the visit to Washington by Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani last month, during which the Bush administration demanded a crackdown.

The bloodiest fighting is taking place in the Swat Valley district of NWFP, an area just 250 kilometres from the Pakistani capital Islamabad. The region was once renowned for its ski resorts and touted as the “Switzerland of Pakistan”. It is now being subjected to artillery bombardments and strafing by helicopter gunships as government troops clash with thousands of militants loyal to Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) or Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law. Founded by imprisoned cleric Sufi Mohammad and now led by his son, Maulana Fazlullah, the organisation is sometimes referred to as the Pakistani Taliban.

Recent estimates put the armed strength of TNSM at 4,500. It has considerable support among the ethnic Pashtun population of the economically and culturally backward rural areas of NWFP. At times, it has controlled over 50 towns and villages in the Swat Valley and has allegedly burned down more than 60 schools that were educating female students. As well as seeking to advance its perspective of imposing Islamic rule over Pakistan, the organisation actively recruits militants to fight in Afghanistan against the US occupation.

A truce between the government and TNSM collapsed last November. Sporadic fighting since has dramatically intensified this month following the killing of three Pakistani intelligence agents by supporters of Fazlullah. As many as 20,000 troops are involved in an operation to shatter the Islamists and kill or capture its leadership.

According to the Pakistani military, 94 militants have been killed thus far, at the cost of 11 of its own troops. The TNSM has issued contradictory press statements on the

fighting. On Monday, it claimed to have only lost nine fighters while killing more than 70 government troops.

A local villager from the Swat Valley, Khan Nawab, told CNS News that the military was inflicting significant civilian casualties with its indiscriminate air attacks. “The military is using helicopter gunships to flush them [the Islamists] away,” he stated, “but sometimes it kills more civilians than the Taliban. It creates resentment among the local population and the government should consider this issue more seriously.” Pakistani analyst Zia ud Din Yousafzai told CNS: “We are virtually at the brink of a civil war.”

Air strikes have reportedly been launched against the towns of Gut, Peuchar, Namal, Charbagh, Malam Jabba, Mancha, Shah Dheri, Shamoza and Deolai. On Wednesday, the Pakistani military claimed that Ali Bakht, a senior leader of the TNSM, and eight other militants were killed during a dawn assault by government troops on Deolai. The Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* reported that large numbers of local villagers attended his funeral that evening.

The scale of the fighting more than matches anything taking place over the border in Afghanistan. Moreover, the battle with the TNSM in the Swat Valley is simply one of a myriad of frontlines in what is developing into an all-out war between the Pakistani government and a burgeoning Islamist opposition centred in the ethnic Pashtun regions of the country.

A review of the other Islamist and tribal warlords who are now in open rebellion against Islamabad and supporting the insurgency in Afghanistan provides some insight into the tremendous crisis confronting both the Pakistani regime and US and NATO forces. The US-backed forces are at war with movements that are deeply embedded in the Pashtun population of the FATA and NWFP, and which can mobilise tens of thousands of armed men, including numerous veterans of the 1980s insurgency against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the subsequent civil war that led to the coming to power of the Taliban in 1996.

Baitullah Mehsud, a 35-year-old tribal chief who is

accused of masterminding last year's assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, controls large parts of the FATA agencies of South Waziristan and North Waziristan. His movement, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, has an armed force of 20,000 Pashtun tribal fighters.

Mehsud provides safe haven for Afghan Taliban warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani and thousands of guerillas. Islamic extremists from around the world—estimates range from 500 to 8,000—are also alleged to be in the Waziristans, fighting alongside Haqqani's and Mehsud's forces. The FATA agencies are the most likely location of Osama bin Laden and those Al Qaeda fighters who survived the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. Since 2004, hundreds of Pakistani troops have been killed in a series of failed offensive to bring the area under government control.

The Khyber FATA agency, which covers the major roads linking Pakistan and Afghanistan, is controlled by radical Islamist Mangal Bagh, who heads a movement known as Lashkar-e-Islam or the Army of Islam. Earlier this year, Bagh claimed that he could mobilise 180,000 fighters. While the true number is far less, militants loyal to Bagh have been able to seize control of entire areas of the adjoining NWFP over recent months. In June and July, Pakistani troops had to wage fierce battles to dislodge Bagh's forces from positions they had occupied near the provincial capital of Peshawar.

The Mohmand FATA agency is ruled by tribal powerbroker Maulvi Omar Khalid, who reportedly operates his own courts and prisons. His forces have engaged in armed clashes with supporters of Mehsud but are also believed to render assistance to Afghan insurgents.

The Bajour FATA agency is the stronghold of Pakistani Islamist Maulvi Omar, who allegedly provides safe haven for the guerillas fighting for Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Omar threatened last month to wage war on the Pakistani government if it did not call off its military operations against Fazlullah's TNSM in the Swat Valley. Guerillas operating out of Bajour are believed to have conducted the July assault on the US base in the Afghan village of Wanat, in which nine American soldiers were killed and 25 wounded.

A Pakistani politician from the NWFP, Afrasiab Khattak, told Radio Free Europe this month: "The situation in our tribal areas is similar to that of pre-September 11 Afghanistan. State authority in those regions has nearly ended. Militants fighting in both Pakistan and Afghanistan now control the area."

The consolidation of safe havens inside Pakistan is the main factor in the escalating insurgency in Afghanistan. The number of attacks on American and NATO troops had reached 3,590 by July 13, an increased of 50 percent

compared with the same time period last year. Two thirds of the attacks took place in nine Afghan provinces that border Pakistan. So far this year, 94 American troops have been killed in Afghanistan, compared with 117 in all of 2007—which itself was the highest yearly number of the war.

The extent of Islamist influence in Pakistan is the direct by-product of the US campaign from the late 1970s on to destabilise the Soviet Union by fomenting an Islamist backlash against the Soviet-backed secular regime in Afghanistan. Pakistan's Pashtun tribal belt was turned into the assembly point for Islamic extremists from every corner of the globe to come to wage jihad or holy war over the border. The region was flooded with weapons and Islamist propaganda while being left by both the US and Pakistani governments in conditions of extreme economic backwardness and poverty. Pashtun youth on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border have grown up in such an atmosphere for close to 30 years.

The legacy of the past US support for radical Islam is a situation in which extremist warlords control areas of the FATA that are populated by more than three million people and exert sway over much of the NWFP, which has a population of 21 million, including several million refugees from Afghanistan. Unsurprisingly, they have won broad support for a new jihad against the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan and for their denunciations of the Pakistani government as a puppet of Washington.

The US insistence that the Pakistani government destroy the Islamists is effectively a demand that it wage years of warfare against a sizeable percentage of the country's population. There is no guarantee that the Pakistani military is capable of sustaining such a campaign, after failing to do so since 2004. Large numbers of the 600,000-strong volunteer Pakistani army are ethnic Pashtuns, recruited from the FATA and NWFP. They will be unwilling participants at best in the bombing and repression of their own people, and a potential source of outright mutiny and rebellion against the government.

Washington's imperialist attempt since 2001 to establish a client state in Afghanistan is an unmitigated disaster. Far from enabling the US to exert influence over the resources of Central Asia, it triggered an insurgency that will fight until the foreign forces leave, and has now brought Pakistan, once a key US ally in the region, to the verge of civil war.



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