Military offensive displaces 300,000 in north-west Pakistan

James Cogan
23 August 2008

A major offensive by the Pakistani military against Islamist militants in the country's Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) has effectively become a campaign of collective punishment against the fiercely independent Pashtun tribes that live in the region. As tens of thousands of refugees pour out of the remote Bajaur agency, they are reporting indiscriminate air strikes and helicopter gunship attacks, devastated villages and farmlands, and hundreds of dead and wounded civilians.

Government troops were dispatched into Bajaur on August 6 to seize control of the Afghan-Pakistan border crossing near the town of Loyesam from militants loyal to Tehrik-e-Taliban—the so-called Pakistani Taliban. Fierce Taliban resistance inflicted significant casualties on Pakistani forces, forcing them to pull back to positions in and around the town of Khar, the administrative headquarters of Bajaur.

Since August 10, the military has stayed in those defensive positions but aerial bombing and artillery barrages have been used to literally depopulate Bajaur and areas of the adjoining agency of Mohmand. After more than two weeks of indiscriminate attacks against alleged militant positions, it is estimated that 300,000 people have been forced to flee from their homes—a significant proportion of the population in the areas not under government control.

The roads out of Bajaur and Mohmand have been filled with desperate families attempting to reach relatives in NWFP or refugee camps that the Pakistani government has established to the east and north of the tribal agencies. The impact of the government campaign is revealed in the few media reports from the area and interviews with displaced tribal people.

Journalists for Pakistan's *News International* in Bajaur reported on August 18: "The major towns of the agency like Khar, Raghagan, Hajilawant, Jar and others were completely deserted, no sign of life was seen there... Some of the houses and a religious seminary near Jar village had been dashed to the ground after being hit by missiles fired from gunship helicopters or jet fighters that were used in the operation..."

In another *News International* report on August 21, a refugee from Zigai said he had fled his home in the Zigai area because "the military helicopter gunships had started pounding civilian targets". Another man said: "They [the military] are not hitting the known targets of the militants but blitzing the civilian abodes."

In an article the following day on the conditions in a refugee camp near Peshawar, Fazl-e-Akbar from Loyesam told *News International*: "Around 30 people were killed in our village during the operation which forced us to leave the town."

A woman who refused to be named said: "I am in a miserable condition here in the camp, but I cannot return to our home due to continued shelling, which has already wounded my daughter and destroyed our house." A new arrival at the camp said: "We arrived here this morning as our village, Nawagai, was heavily shelled by gunship helicopters."

The *News International* journalist described the conditions facing people in the camp as "pitiable, as they did not have the required facilities, including power, potable water, toilets, etc."

Journalist Daud Khan reported in an August 22 article for the Korean website *Ohmy News* that "the internally displaced people of Bajaur said the troops did not target the militant centres, which are located at stone throws distance from their bases." A man named Gul Zamin, from an area near Khar, said: "Rather, the helicopters and artillery target the civilian population, resulting in mounting civilian casualties."

Pakistani officials claimed on Thursday that its operation had killed over 480 Taliban fighters, at the cost of 25 troops. There are no credible reports as to the number of civilians who have been killed or wounded but the anecdotal evidence suggests that it runs into the hundreds.

There is no doubt that the Bush administration is behind the Pakistani government's decision to wage war in the tribal agencies. The assault on Bajaur was launched in the wake of Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani's visit to Washington in late July, where he was presented with US demands that Pakistan prevent the FATA being used as a safe haven by insurgents fighting American and NATO troops in Afghanistan.

In return, the Bush administration appears to have encouraged former dictator and close ally Pervez Musharraf to step down as president, which he did on Monday. The following day, the head of the Pakistani military, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, flew to Kabul for high-level talks with US and NATO commanders on coordinating operations against the insurgents on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border.

© World Socialist Web Site

On Thursday, President Bush reportedly called Musharraf to thank him for his support for the bogus US "war on terror" over the past seven years. He then called Gilani to insist that the Pakistani government intensify its operations against the anti-US militants.

Since the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, the Bajaur agency has been used as a base by the Afghan Hezb-e-Islami movement headed by Pashtun warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, which is the main anti-occupation force fighting for control of the eastern provinces of Afghanistan. This year, it has inflicted significant casualties on both American and Afghan government troops in border districts such as Paktika, Khost, Paktia, Nangahar, Konar and Nurestan.

The Pakistani tribal agencies of South Waziristan and North Waziristan are the strongholds of the overall head of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, as well as the safe haven for the Afghan Taliban forces led by Jalaluddin Haqqani. Between them, the two Islamist warlords are believed to command 20,000 to 30,000 fighters, who are conducting an increasingly effective guerilla war against the US and NATO forces in southern Afghanistan.

Analysts believe the Taliban and Hekmatyar's forces are pursuing a similar military plan to that used during the CIA-backed guerilla war against the Soviet military occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. They are gradually extending the areas under their control, positioning themselves to disrupt supply routes to the major cities and, ultimately, encircle Kandahar and Kabul.

The US demands for a crackdown in the tribal agencies to disrupt the Afghan insurgency may end up plunging Pakistan into severe political instability or even civil war. The brutal character of the offensive in Bajaur is provoking outrage among the millions of Pakistanis, especially in the Pashtun-populated FATA and NWFP, who oppose the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Anger over the offensive has the potential to shatter the unstable ruling coalition between Gilani's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) led by Nawaz Sharif just six months after it took government.

Sharif has threatened to leave the coalition over the PPP's refusal to reinstate a number of senior judges sacked by Musharraf. The tremendous suffering being caused by the government offensive is likely to trigger further calls for a break with the PPP. Most PML-N supporters label the war in Afghanistan as "America's war" and oppose using the Pakistani armed forces against Islamic militants in the Pashtun tribal agencies.

Jamaat-e-Islami, the oldest Islamic-based party in Pakistan, is organising demonstrations by its supporters and refugees from the FATA, denouncing Gilani and demanding an end to the military operation. The Pashtun-based Awami National Party, which holds the provincial government in NWFP and is a minor partner of the ruling coalition, is under intense pressure to come out openly against the offensive.

Yesterday, NWFP Religious Affairs Minister Namroz Khan denounced the invasion of Afghanistan as a neo-colonial war for control of Central Asia. "No one can deny the fact that Pakistan and Afghanistan are the gateway to the rich oil and gas reserves of the Central Asian republics," he said. "The 'war on terror' was started to gain control of these reserves."

The Pakistani Taliban is heightening the political instability with a vicious campaign of suicide bombings against police and military facilities in various parts of the country.

Two bombers blew themselves up on Thursday at the gates of the heavily-guarded Wah armaments factory, just 30 kilometres from the capital Islamabad. As many as 78 people were killed and over 100 wounded. Most of the casualties were workers leaving their shift. Taliban spokesman and Bajaur tribal leader Maulvi Omar told journalists via telephone: "If it [the offensive in the FATA] doesn't stop, we will continue such attacks. The Wah factory is a killer factory where arms are being produced to kill our women and children."

On Tuesday, a suicide bomber blew himself up in the waiting room of a major hospital in Dera Ismail Khan, a city in the southern region of NWFP. The purported target was a police unit that had been deployed to the hospital to keep control of the family of a local Shiite leader, Basit Ali, who had been gunned down earlier in the day. The family had gathered at the hospital to grieve and protest. At least 32 people were killed, including seven police and 14 relatives of Basit Ali, and another 55 injured.

The Taliban has denied that the attack had anti-Shiite motives. However, the Islamist movement adheres to an extremist trend of Sunni Islam, which views Shiite Muslims as heretics.

The attacks against targets far from the tribal agencies are intended to demonstrate the reach of the Taliban and pressure the government to call off its offensive. On August 19, Mehsud offered to take part in peace talks, provided that the Pakistani government repudiated "the pro-US policies pursued by the Musharraf-led regime".

However, the PPP-led government, which is just as beholden to Washington as Musharraf, has shown no signs that it intends to call off military operations in the tribal areas.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site