

Pakistani military launches new offensive in border areas

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Since August, a Pakistani military offensive against Islamist militants of the Pakistani Taliban, or Tehrik-e-Taliban, has laid waste to the tribal agency of Bajaur and the adjoining Swat Valley region of North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

The military claims to have killed over 1,500 "Taliban" in Bajaur, at the cost of 83 dead and more than 300 wounded soldiers. In the process, much of the area has been forcibly depopulated. An estimated 300,000 people have been driven from their homes by indiscriminate government bombardments and air strikes.

The ruthless campaign is now being extended into the agency of Mohmand, to the south of Bajaur. On Thursday, the Islamabad government issued an ultimatum to the ethnic Pashtun tribes in Mohmand to drive out a Pakistani Taliban cell led by local militant Abdul Wali, or face destruction.

The statement declared: "We warn the Mohmand tribes to sever ties with Tehrik-e-Taliban's Abdul Wali group as the government is preparing action against the group. Get all elements of the Abdul Wali group out of your homes, otherwise they will be targeted by helicopters and jet bombers."

The Mohmand population, which is estimated to be around 400,000, has effectively been cut off from the outside world. The military has established heavily-guarded checkpoints to close the roads to Peshawar, the capital of NWFP.

Fresh troops have taken positions in the agency capital Ghalanai and are enforcing a strict curfew. A mentally retarded man was shot dead on Thursday after he wandered onto the streets after dark and did not respond to soldiers' warnings.

Since the beginning of last week, alleged Taliban

positions in various Mohmand villages have been pounded by artillery. Reports indicate that a number of houses have been destroyed. There are no figures yet on the number of civilian or militant casualties. People on foot are reportedly streaming past army barricades, to try and reach the safety of the refugee camps that now surround Peshawar.

The Taliban retaliated on Wednesday with an attack on security forces in the nearby NWFP district of Charsadda. A suicide bomber drove an explosives-laden bus into a school that was being used as a command post. Four troops of the paramilitary Frontier Corp were killed, along with two civilian passers-by. Another 15 soldiers and civilians were wounded.

Suspected Islamist militants also carried out a series of attacks on foreigners in Peshawar last week, killing an American aid worker, kidnapping an Iranian diplomat and wounding a Japanese journalist.

Government artillery fire and air strikes in Mohmand continued over the weekend. The likely impact can be gauged from recent reports on the devastation wrought by the Pakistani military in Bajaur province, particularly around the border town of Loe Sam previously under Taliban control.

A *New York Times* feature on November 11 commented: "To save Loe Sam, the army has destroyed it. The shops and homes of the 7,000 people who lived here are a heap of gray rubble, blown to bits..."

The article noted that the Pakistani military still only holds a portion of the agency after three months of fighting. The mountainous terrain along the Afghan-Pakistan border remains largely under insurgent control. The Islamists, government forces have discovered, operate from intricate tunnel and bunker complexes that are difficult to locate and even more difficult to breach.

The underground network, first developed during the long US and Pakistani-backed guerrilla war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, enables insurgents to move undetected back and forth over the border. Bajaur and other tribal agencies were used as safe havens and training grounds for anti-Soviet jihadists at the time, just as they are being used now by those fighting the US and NATO occupation of the country.

The web of insurgent bases extends from Bajaur, the northernmost agency, into Mohmand and Khyber agency and through to the largest agencies and main strongholds of the Taliban, North and South Waziristan. From Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA), the Taliban have steadily rebuilt their influence across southern Afghanistan and stepped up their attacks on US and NATO forces, and on troops and police of the Afghan puppet government headed by President Hamid Karzai.

At the same time, Pakistani sympathisers of the Taliban have won a broader following in the FATA and NWFP by opposing the Pakistani government's backing of the US occupation. After the military regime of Pervez Musharraf violated the traditional autonomy of the tribal communities and deployed troops into the FATA in 2004, dozens of tribes declared support for Islamist leaders.

A particular target of Taliban operations in Pakistan are US and NATO supply convoys driving up from the port of Karachi and entering Afghanistan via the Khyber Pass. An unusually large attack was carried out on November 10 against 13 trucks transporting humvees and water tanks. Insurgents captured the entire convoy and its cargo.

The extension of Pakistani military operations into Mohmand is taking place amid intense US pressure on the civilian government of President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani. The Bush administration, president-elect Barack Obama, and American commanders have all demanded stepped-up operations inside the FATA to disrupt Afghan insurgent activity.

The situation for the US-led occupation is steadily deteriorating. A Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, told the BBC last week that the movement now controlled at least half the country.

Despite the constant protests by Zardari and Gilani,

the US is continuing its own unilateral military strikes on alleged Al Qaeda or Taliban targets inside Pakistan. On Friday, unmanned Predator drones fired missiles in houses in North Waziristan, killing 12 people, according to initial reports from the area. The US attack was at least the nineteenth violation of Pakistani sovereignty since August.



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