

# Pakistan: Tens of thousands displaced by US-ordered offensive

Keith Jones  
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Tens of thousands of Pashtun-speaking villagers have been forced to flee from their homes in recent days as the result of the punishing offensive the Pakistani military has mounted against pro-Taliban militants in the country's North-West Frontier Province.

The offensive—which has seen the Pakistani armed forces making heavy use of artillery shelling and strafing from helicopter gunships and fighter planes—was launched last Sunday after days of escalating pressure from Washington for urgent action to prevent the “Talibanization” of Pakistan (See: “US escalates threats against Pakistan”).

The military offensive began in Lower Dir, a North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) district situated between the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Swat Valley. In two days of bombing and ground combat, the Pakistani military claims to have killed 75 Taliban insurgents and suffered 10 fatalities.

Then on Tuesday, the military launched a fresh offensive in Buner, an adjacent district some 100 kilometers (62 miles) northwest of the national capital, Islamabad.

Buner came to international attention last week after senior Obama administration and Pentagon officials and US congressional leaders claimed that the district had fallen to the Taliban without any resistance on the part of Pakistani authorities. Islamabad, some suggested, could be next.

The Pakistani government and military initially downplayed the Taliban rebellion in Buner. But after a detachment of Pakistani frontier police came under attack and under relentless pressure from Washington, the government vowed to quickly reassert its full authority over the district.

Last Friday, the Taliban claimed that they had ordered the withdrawal of their forces, estimated to number 400 to 500, from Buner and Pakistani television broadcast video of some fighters appearing to leave the district. But government officials later claimed the evacuation had been a ruse.

“We are not going to spare them,” Interior Minister Rehman Malik told a press conference Tuesday shortly before the military launched coordinated air and ground strikes in Buner “Action will be taken,” Malik declared, “if anyone tries to block our efforts to re-establish the writ of the government in

Buner and other areas.”

Military spokesman General Athar Abbas said Pakistani forces have been mandated to “eliminate and expel” the Pakistani Taliban from Buner, but refused to specify the number of troops involved. He said the operation will be completed within the week.

By Wednesday evening the Pakistani military was claiming to have retaken control of Daggar, the district capital, and to have killed 50 Taliban militia, while suffering one fatality. Ground operations were still underway in at least three other towns. The insurgents were said to be holding more than fifty police and Frontier Constabulary personnel hostages.

In Swat, long the center of Taliban activity in the NWFP, talks relating to the implementation of a truce have broken down as a result of the Pakistani military offensive. The government maintains that a pledge to implement a socially conservative form of sharia law in Swat and all the districts of the Malakand Division is dependent on the Taliban disarming.

Seizing control of Buner, which lies south of Swat, and of Lower Dir, which connects the Swat Valley to the FATA, will strengthen the government's hand, since it chokes off easy escape routes for those Taliban now active in Swat.

Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell welcomed the Pakistani offensive, while insisting it needs to become permanent. “We are encouraging of these efforts,” said Morrell. “...The key is to sustain these operations at this tempo and to keep the militants on their heels and to, ultimately, defeat them.”

On Wednesday evening, the US carried out a further drone attack in South Waziristan, killing six people travelling in a pickup truck. Since last August, the US, in flagrant violation of international law, has carried out dozens of drone attacks inside Pakistan—attacks which have resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties.

While US officials and the US media have long complained that Pakistani authorities are appeasing the Taliban, hundreds of thousands of poor villagers have been rendered refugees by the intermittent fighting that has taken place in FATA, and more recently parts of the NWFP, since 2004. The Pakistani military says it has lost more than 1900 troops. There are no accurate figures for insurgent, let alone, civilian deaths, but the Pakistani

military is infamous for its routine use of indiscriminate shelling and strafing. There are numerous eyewitness accounts of villages being leveled.

The most economically backward and deprived part of Pakistan, FATA remains subject to British colonial laws that allow the imposition of collective punishment.

The fighting of the last four days is widely reported to have caused more thirty thousand people to flee their homes.

Based on information supplied by researchers on the ground in Lower Dir, Amnesty International reported Tuesday that in the Maidan *tehsil* (sub-district) “bodies were left lying on the streets and in the fields because people were too afraid to move them.”

“Neither the Taleban nor the government forces seem to care about the well-being of the residents of Lower Dir,” said Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific director, Sam Zarifi. “The Taleban show no compunction about using civilian areas as combat zones, even knowing that the military will respond with indiscriminate long-distance shelling and aerial bombardment.”

The *Dawn*, Pakistan’s largest English-language daily, carried a brief report Wednesday that pointed to the conditions that have caused mass flight from Lower Dir. “Helicopters shelled our village and our children were terrified,” said Khan, a driver, who had walked with his family from his native village to Peshawar. “On the way we saw destroyed homes and Taliban carrying Kalashnikovs.”

Officials from the NWFP and FATA told a meeting in Geneva this week that as many as a million people have been displaced by the fighting in northwest Pakistan, with most of the displacements coming in the past 8 months.

According to authorities in the NWFP more than 550,000 Internally Displaced Persons or IDPs have been registered in that province alone. Officials in faraway Karachi say that between 100,000 and 300,000 IDPs have settled in Pakistan’s largest city.

The fighting in the northwest has exacerbated communal tensions in Karachi, especially between various Pathan groups and the MQM—a party that claims to represent the *mohajirs* (descendants of Urdu-speaking Partition refugees) and which previously supported the US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf and is now a partner in the country’s Pakistan People’s Party-led coalition government.

On Wednesday communal clashes erupted between Pathans and *mohajirs* in Karachi, resulting in at least 20 deaths.

While some camps have been set up for refugees in FATA and NWFP, as many as 80 percent of the refugees are reported to have crowded into the homes of friends and relatives. There are increasing instances of five and six families sharing a single home.

“It’s a serious humanitarian situation of major magnitude” said Denis McNamara an advisor to the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the organization that sponsored this

week’s meeting in Geneva.

Washington, meanwhile, is adamant that Islamabad intensify and expand the fighting. Indeed, a key conclusion of US President Barack Obama’s “review” of the US strategy to win the Afghan war is that Afghanistan and Pakistan must be considered as constituting a single war theater.

In a further concession to Washington, Pakistan, the *New York Times* reported Thursday, has agreed to redeploy 6000 troops from its border with India to the country’s Afghan border region.

The *Times* report also said that the US is pressing Pakistan to accept more US military trainers and that the issue will likely be raised by Obama at the summit meeting he is to have with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Afghan President Hamid Karzai May 6-7. The Pentagon admits to currently having about 70 trainers and technical specialists working with the Pakistani military inside Pakistan.

Earlier this month, Richard Holbrooke, the US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullen, pressed Pakistani authorities to agree to the mounting of joint US-Pakistani military operations inside Pakistan, but they were rebuffed. An unnamed senior administration official is quoted by the *Times* as saying, “There’s a red line about our advisors and any foreign boots on the ground in Pakistan right now.”

Speaking to reporters in Washington Wednesday, US Marine Corps General James Conway dismissed Pakistani concerns that the US military “surge” in Afghanistan could exacerbate Pakistan’s crisis.

General Ashfaq Kiyani, the head of Pakistan’s armed forces, had “expressed concern,” said Conway, “that our forces going into the south could cause a refugee problem that Pakistan is ill-equipped to handle right now, based on their fiscal scenario, and the possibility that we could be forcing Taliban out of the south and onto supply lines that the Pakistani forces are currently trying to protect for us.”

Conway said it was far from certain the Taliban “will flush to” Pakistan. “But in any event, we’ve got to do what we’ve got to do in the south.”



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