

Pakistani military intensifies its offensive

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Amid reports of a mounting, war-induced humanitarian crisis, Pakistan's armed forces intensified their offensive against Pakistani Taliban insurgents in Swat and two adjacent districts in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) Thursday. The country's political and military leaders, meanwhile, made a series of statements vowing that the offensive will continue until the state's supremacy has been bloodily reasserted throughout the Pashtun-speaking province.

In a televised address to the nation late Thursday evening, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said the government would "eliminate the militants and terrorists." Earlier in the day, army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani told a meeting of corps commanders that the "present security situation requires that all elements of national power should work in close harmony to fight the menace of terrorism and extremism." The army, Kiyani continued, will "employ requisite resources to ensure a decisive ascendancy over the militants."

Gilani's and Kayani's speeches were aimed at Washington as much as at their respective Pakistani audiences. President Asif Ali Zardari has faced relentless pressure from the Obama administration, the Pentagon, Congressional leaders and the US media during this week's trilateral US-Pakistani-Afghan presidential summit to take more aggressive action to suppress the indigenous Taliban insurgency in Pakistan and root out Afghan Taliban "safe havens."

Tens of thousands of people, most of them impoverished villagers, have been forced to flee for their lives since the Pakistani military, under heavy US pressure, launched its anti-Taliban offensive April 26. Using heavy artillery, F-16 fighter jets, and helicopter gunships, Pakistan's armed forces have pummeled suspected Taliban positions in the NWFP districts of Lower Dir, Buner, and, as of this week, the Swat Valley, causing widespread civilian casualties.

According to Thursday's *Dawn*, 35 civilians were killed the previous day "either in crossfire between troops and militants," by army "artillery fire or for violating [the government] curfew in different areas of Swat."

As many as half a million people have been displaced by the recent fighting, the International Committee Red Cross warned in a statement yesterday. These are in addition to the large number—estimates range from 300,000 to 600,000—who were rendered internal refugees as the result of intermittent military offensives in the adjoining, historically autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) during the past two years.

Many have fled their homes in Buner, Lower Dir and Swat on foot and have had to travel through difficult mountain passes only to find, when they finally reach towns unaffected by the fighting, that the government has made no provision for them. A report in Thursday's *New York Times* painted a harrowing picture of thousands of refugees overrunning a hospital in Mardan.

Previously Pakistani authorities have said they will establish six refugee camps to provide for the displaced. In his national address Gilani committed the grand sum of 1 billion Pakistani rupees (\$12.5 million US) for assistance and rehabilitation for the displaced.

An article posted by the McClatchy Newspapers titled "Pakistani army flattening villages as it battles Taliban" points to the Pakistani military's indifference to the lives and livelihoods of the poor peasants and herders whom it claims to be liberating from the Taliban. The article quotes a 45-year-old villager from Buner as saying, "We didn't see any Taliban; they are up in the mountains, yet the army flattens our villages." Another who was fleeing Buner said 80 of the 400 houses in his village of Kawga had been destroyed. "I don't think they've killed even one Taliban. Only ordinary people."

An unnamed US official who, according to the McClatchy report, "closely tracks Pakistan developments" said the Pakistani military "is just destroying stuff. They have zero ability to deliver services."

The Obama administration and the US media have sought to excuse the Pakistani military's—and it own—responsibility for the humanitarian crisis engulfing the NWFP and FATA by claiming that it lacks advanced counter-insurgency equipment and training.

In reality, the military has an inglorious, decades-long

record of robbing the Pakistani people, suppressing their basic democratic rights, and employing brutality against them—all with the support and patronage of the Pentagon and US political elite, which continue to laud it as the Pakistan's most professional and effective institution.

As in Afghanistan, where US forces have inflicted large civilian casualties, the violence the Pakistani military has exacted on the Pashtun population has become an important factor fueling the insurgency. This violence has included the imposition of colonial-style collective punishments on villages and tribes in FATA deemed to be insufficiently supportive of the counter-insurgency war.

The Taliban insurgency within Pakistan has been limited to majority-Pashtun areas. But its recent spread into the Swat Valley and the Taliban's success in making, as even the *New York Times* has been forced to concede, a certain appeal to the socio-economic grievances of the oppressed peasantry, has sounded alarm bells within sections of the Pakistani elite. Pakistani commentators have noted parallels between the NFWP and parts of the southern Punjab. In both places the Pakistani state allowed Islamic fundamentalists to provide education and social services, which it itself refused to provide, and cultivated Islamicist militia, whose foot soldiers were drawn from the poor, as useful instruments of its geo-political strategy. And both regions are riven by a deep class cleavage between a tiny elite of semi-feudal landlords and an impoverished peasantry.

Washington, which continues to count on Pakistan to serve as the conduit for the vast majority of the arms, oil and food that fuel the Afghan war, has welcomed the current Pakistani military offensive, while making clear that it expects it to be "sustained" for the foreseeable future.

In their public appearances at the trilateral summit, Zardari and Obama beamed smiles, but behind the scenes the tensions were palpable.

In the run-up to the summit, Obama and key administration officials had made a series of statements questioning the survivability of Pakistan's civilian government, statements that were widely interpreted in both Islamabad and Washington as signaling that the Obama administration and Pentagon were weighing their options as regards Pakistan and might yet again support a military takeover.

In a Capitol Hill appearance Wednesday, Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan thought it politic to proclaim that the administration would not even discuss a "Plan B," so as not to "undercut" Zardari's "legitimacy."

According to a report in Thursday's *New York Times*, during Zardari's Washington visit Obama administration officials made only fleeting references to what "privately

[they] acknowledge is ... most important: how to get the Pakistani government and army to move the country's troops from the east, where they are preoccupied with a war with India ... to the west, where the Islamist insurgents are taking one town after another."

If the *Times* is to be believed, the US demands were quite specific. Pakistan's 11th infantry division, now based in Lahore, which lies little more than a dozen miles from the Indian city of Amritsar, was identified by Washington as better deployed in Pakistan's northwest.

During the Cold War, when India was aligned with the USSR, the US encouraged Pakistan in its historic rivalry with India. But to the consternation of the Pakistani elite, Washington has been aggressively courting India for the past decade as a potential geo-political counterweight to China. Not only did the US recently broker an India-exclusive change in the regime governing world nuclear trade which will allow India to import civilian nuclear technology for the first time in 35 years and thereby to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on the development of its nuclear arsenal. With US encouragement, India has emerged as a major prop of the Karzai government in Afghanistan and the country's largest trading partner.

From the perspective of the Pakistani elite, the Indo-US strategic partnership, underpinned by US sales of advanced military technology to India, is a grave threat. It has not passed unnoticed in Islamabad that the Obama administration, in the face of ferocious Indian pressure, put paid, soon after coming to office, to any suggestion it might become involved in resolving the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir.

Acutely conscious of the economic and political crisis engulfing the Pakistani state, the Indian elite, meanwhile, has taken an increasingly aggressive posture against Islamabad. In the wake of last November's terrorist atrocity in Mumbai, there were repeated threats from New Delhi of a possible cross-border strike into Pakistan.

Washington, for its part, sought to turn the Mumbai attack to its own advantage, pressing restraint on New Delhi, while demanding that Islamabad do its bidding in respect to suppressing the Taliban.



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