

Two million rendered refugees by fighting in Pakistan

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The Pakistan military offensive against pro-Taliban militia in the country's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) has produced a massive humanitarian crisis. More than one-and-a-half million people have fled their homes during the past month—the largest number of people to have been displaced by violence since the Rwandan genocide of 1994, reports the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

The fighting and resulting exodus of Pashtuns from the NWFP is also exacerbating national-ethnic tensions in Pakistan, a country founded on communalism and beset by ethnic and religious-communal cleavages.

On Friday, the United Nations' refugee agency (the UNHCR) issued an urgent appeal for \$450 million, saying it had only raised \$86 million of the \$543 million it calculates it will need to finance UN-led efforts to support the refugees until the end of 2009.

"The scale of this displacement is extraordinary in terms of size and speed and has caused incredible suffering," said the UN's humanitarian coordinator in Pakistan, Martin Mogwanja.

UN officials have repeatedly expressed concern that if the humanitarian crisis is not quickly addressed, the military offensive Islamabad has launched, under heavy pressure from Washington in the name of enforcing the writ of the Pakistani state over all its territory, could in fact greatly intensify opposition to the Pakistani government.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres told CNN, "The scale of the problem is such that all our resources combined cannot cope with it. And it's very important for this population not to feel abandoned.

"Without massive support of the international community for the Pakistani people," said Guterres, "this will become a very dramatic problem, and not only a humanitarian problem."

Similar fears were expressed by an unnamed western diplomat in an interview with CBS news service May 19. The diplomat said the refugee crisis constituted a threat to Pakistan's "fundamental stability and security"; then added, "The situation looks very grim at the moment. I hope we can mobilize enough resources to prevent this situation from becoming totally explosive."

More than 2 million people have fled the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and three districts of the Malakand Division of the NWFP—Swat, Buner, and Lower Dir—since last August, with 1.7 million of them fleeing since May 2.

Some 1.45 million people have registered with the NWFP social welfare department since May 2 as Internally Displaced Persons or IDPs. But government authorities believe as many as 300,000 IDPs have yet to register. According to the UN refugee agency, only 15 percent of those registered have found shelter at IDP camps, which have mushroomed from 9 to 26 over the past month. Others have taken refuge in schools. But the vast majority have crowded in with relatives or friends. In one instance, reports the *Guardian*, 85 persons were found crammed in a single dwelling.

UN officials are warning that they expect the number of refugees to continue to rise, with a probable spike in September when the US's military "surge" in Afghanistan will be at full throttle. Speaking last week before a US Congressional Committee, the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullen, sought to sidestep a question as to whether the coming US military offensive in Afghanistan will further destabilize Pakistan by driving anti-US Pashtun insurgents from the Afghan to the Pakistan side of the British-imposed Durand Line.

But the situation in the much of north-western Pakistan is already catastrophic.

Most of the refugees, says Friday's UNCHR appeal "have lost homes and most of their belongings, fleeing with nothing more than what they were wearing at the time. With the onset of summer, men, women and especially children are suffering from heat-related skin infections as well as water-borne diseases. Many are suffering from traumatic stress as well."

Another major problem, adds the UNCHR, is "the heat in the camps, which routinely reaches 45 degrees C.," much higher than prevailing temperatures in the Swat Valley.

CNN has reported that last Wednesday refugees blocked a main road in Mardan (the capital city of the NWFP district of Mardan) to protest Pakistani authorities' failure to provide them with food, water and other basic services. A protester, Hazrat Bilal, angrily declared, "The government has been making big promises, but none of these were ever fulfilled."

There is virtually no independent reporting from the conflict zone, but from all reports fighting has been fierce, with Pakistani military forces using F-16 fighters, helicopter gunships, and heavy artillery to bomb, blast, and strafe suspected insurgent positions with little, if any,

concern for civilian life.

On Saturday the military claimed to have carved a corridor from the outskirts to the center of the city of Mingora, which, until the beginning of this month, had a population of over 200,000. The military further reported that it is now waging a battle street by street and building by building to clear Mingora of the Islamacist insurgents. Yet it concedes that as many as 20,000 civilians remain in the city.

Refugees, while often condemning the Islamacists, have repeatedly indicted the Pakistani military for its wanton disregard for civilian life, with many reporting that military forces flattened civilian dwellings and in some cases whole villages. Chand Bibi told reporters from NPR on line: “We were having tea when all of a sudden an army operation with mortar shells and big bombs began. There was a battle around my house. My husband was fetching water at the well. I grabbed three of my children. My husband got left behind with the rest of the children. We jumped on a passing truck as a plane flew overhead. Two vehicles were destroyed. God left mine intact.”

The Pakistani military offensive has unfolded during harvest season in NWFP, meaning that the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of poor farmers is now rotting in the fields. “If they miss this harvest, it is going to be another 12 months before they can produce their own food,” explained UN World Food Program emergency coordinator Dominique Frankefort.

Speaking Saturday, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani said the military’s offensive “was the best planned action, keeping in view all the humanitarian and military aspects, and is being carried out with precision by the military ...”

This is a cynical, bare-faced lie. The military was unleashed in the NWFP in great haste after the Pakistani elite came under intense pressure from Washington to take the offensive against pro-Taliban militia. The Pentagon wants its pivotal supply routes through Pakistan—routes along which as much as 80 percent of the fuel, food and weaponry for the US forces in Afghanistan travels—better secured. It is also anxious for Pakistani forces to bear much of the fighting needed to secure the puppet regime in Kabul, so as to lessen US casualties.

In the run-up to last month’s trilateral summit of the presidents of the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Washington offered the near bankrupt Pakistani state increased economic development and military aide, while signalling that it could withdraw support for the Pakistan People’s Party-led civilian government if it didn’t do more to help the US win the AfPak war.

Earlier this month, Gilani announced a miserable 1 billion rupees (\$12.5 million US) in aid for the refugees created by the military offensive in Swat and adjacent districts. Now Islamabad estimates at least \$1 billion will be required for IDP relief and rehabilitation. Speaking at a “donors’ conference” of government representatives in Islamabad last Thursday, Gilani pleaded for assistance arguing there would be “grave repercussions” if Islamabad proves unable to cope with the refugee crisis. The day before the conference convened, the US announced \$110 million in emergency assistance, the equivalent of about \$55 for each person currently displaced. Another \$114

million in pledges were made at the conference by various governments including the Britain, France and Germany.

In his remarks Saturday, Gilani affirmed that those displaced by the military offensive in north-west Pakistan have the right to find refuge anywhere in the country. But one of the PPP’s partners in both the national government and the government of the province Sindh, the MQM, has been agitating alongside Sindh nationalist parties to prevent the displaced NWFP Pashtuns from finding refuge in Sindh.

On Saturday, Sindh’s major cities, including Karachi and Hyderabad, were paralyzed by an anti-Pashtun general strike called by the MQM, the Jeay Sind Quami Mahaz (Qureshi) and other Sindh nationalist organizations—a strike enforced by sporadic violence.

Millions of Pashtuns live in Karachi, where they make up much of the most impoverished section of the working class. Naturally, many of those displaced by the fighting in the NWFP are now travelling to Karachi and other cities in Sindh to stay with family and friends. But various ethnic-based parties are seeking to whip up a communal backlash against the Pashtuns, under conditions where working people of all nationalities face extreme hardship because of spiralling food prices, a chronic power shortage, and the lack of basic public and social services.

The MQM—which claims to be the voice of the *mohajirs* (Urdu-speakers who migrated to Pakistan in 1947-48 after the communal partition of the subcontinent)—was previously a strong supporter of the US-backed dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf. The MQM and its new-found Sindh nationalist allies are demanding that the Pashtun refugees be barred from Pakistan’s second most populous province and, failing that, that they be subject to compulsory registration and confined to refugee camps, that is, that they be treated as detainees.

Meanwhile, in reply to a question about the possibility that terrorists could disguise themselves as displaced persons, army spokesman Maj-General Abbas said Saturday that the military was considering restricting the movement of the refugees and confining them to camps, presumably policed by security forces. “We are working on it,” said Abbas, “but cannot give a deadline.”



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