

Millions displaced as Pakistani military extends its offensive

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The Pakistani military is deepening its assault against Islamist militants in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) district of Swat Valley and beginning to extend its operations into other ethnic Pashtun-populated areas. The Obama administration insisted that the Pakistani government launch the offensive as part of US efforts to crush the anti-occupation insurgency over the border in Afghanistan.

The present focus of the fighting is Mingora, once the largest city in Swat with a population over 250,000. It is estimated that all but 10,000 to 20,000 of its inhabitants fled before the military assault. In the east of the valley, troops have reportedly seized the former ski resort town of Maalam Jabba. To the west, operations are continuing against the remaining militants in the Peochar Valley.

About 1,500 armed Islamists are thought to be holding Mingora against the advance of government troops. Military spokesman, Major General Athar Abbas, told journalists that the army had seized over 50 percent of the city. He said many militants were believed to have escaped north, toward the town of Kabbal, rather than make a last stand. The military claims to have encountered "stiff resistance" in the Kabbal area.

A resident who recently left Mingora downplayed reports that the militants had abandoned the city. According to ABC News, he told his family that they had pulled back from the suburbs and taken up positions in easier-to-defend office blocks, underground basements and parking lots in the central business district. He claimed the military was preventing people from leaving their homes and had issued warnings that people on the streets would be shot on sight.

The official casualty figure has barely changed this week. The government claims that some 1,190 militants have been killed at the cost of 75 Pakistani soldiers. There are no official or independent estimates of civilian deaths. The military has flatly denied a Human Rights Watch report that shelling on May 26 killed 19 civilians in the township of Charbagh, some 16 kilometres north of Mingora.

There is no dispute over the massive scale of the refugee crisis that has been caused by the military offensive into the Swat Valley and the neighbouring districts of Buner and Lower Dir—known as the Malakand region. The UN refugee agency estimates that at least two million people have fled or been forced from their homes since operations began in late April. In an interview with CNN, a man claimed that troops ordered his entire village on the outskirts of Mingora to evacuate.

Combined with the refugees who fled from the army offensive last year in the tribal agencies of Bajaur and Mohmand, there are now as many as three million predominantly ethnic Pashtun internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Malakand.

While hundreds of thousands are sheltering with extended family in cities and towns across NWFP, thousands more have been forced into overcrowded and poorly serviced camps that have sprung up across the province. Infectious disease outbreaks have already been reported.

The plight of those who did not flee the combat zone is worse. They are unable to get out due to military operations, curfews and roadblocks. The civilians—possibly as many as 200,000 in the northern reaches of the Swat Valley—have only limited access to essentials.

Human Rights Watch issued an appeal on Tuesday: "The government cannot allow the local population to remain trapped without food, clean water and medicine as a tactic to defeat the Taliban." The military has refused to ease up its assault, saying militants could escape. Major General Abbas told the press: "Lifting the curfew would mean letting the operational situation slip out of hand."

Military attacks have begun in other areas of the FATA, coinciding with the operations in Swat. On Sunday, air strikes repeatedly pounded Taliban positions in the tribal agency of Orakzai. Reports from the area stated that a number of students

were wounded when a seminary allegedly housing militants was bombed.

On Tuesday, helicopter gunships attacked sites in South Waziristan, one of the strongholds of the main Pakistani Taliban leader, Baitullah Mehsud. Mehsud's 15,000-strong Pashtun tribal militia has close ties with the Afghan Haqqani network, which is one of the main resistance groups fighting US and NATO forces.

According to a report by the Emirates-based *National*, a deal has been struck between the government and Waziri leader Haj Nazeer. Large numbers of troops are said to have moved unchallenged through the areas held by his militia and taken up positions adjacent to territory controlled by the Pakistani Taliban. A senior intelligence officer told the *Dawn* newspaper: "We're ready for an operation in South Waziristan. Now it's just a matter of time."

Thousands of civilians are now fleeing the agency in anticipation of a major confrontation. Preparations are being made in the town of Tank for the possible arrival of as many as 200,000 refugees over the coming days and weeks.

Communalist tensions

The movement of millions of ethnic Pashtuns out of their traditional homelands has triggered a xenophobic response in other parts of Pakistan, especially by parties in Sindh province.

Over the past several decades, several million Pashtuns have sought a better life in the more developed urban centres of Sindh, such as Karachi, Pakistan's main financial and commercial centre. Many of their relatives who are being forced from the FATA and NWFP are hoping to take refuge with them.

Strikes and protests have been called by Sindhi demagogues since Sunday to demand that the government prevent any of the IDPs entering the province. Feeding off the propaganda surrounding the so-called "war on terrorism", all Pashtuns are being branded as a threat.

Speaking to the Adnkronos news agency, a leader of the Sindhi communalist party, Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz (JSQM), justified anti-Pashtun discrimination saying: "The arrival of people from NWFP has increased the presence of the Taliban in Sindh. We have information that there is a plan to shift Al

Qaeda's base to Sindh. We will not let this happen."

One family from Mingora, comprised mainly of women and children, who managed to reach relatives in Karachi, told Radio Free Europe they had been stopped on the road by armed Sindhi nationalists. They were instructed to go back "because you are Pashtun ... you are Taliban and terrorists". They were only allowed to continue after hours of pleading.

Large-scale clashes could result. The home of a leader of the Pashtun-based Awami National Party (ANP) was bombed on Sunday. His nephew was killed. The same day, communalist violence was reported in various parts of the city.

The Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), which is part of the Pakistani government and mainly draws support from the descendants of people in Sindh who were forced to flee from India during the 1947 partition, has joined in the ethnic persecution of Pashtuns. Its leaders are demanding that the IDPs either stay in NWFP or go to Punjab province.

Communalist agitation against Pashtuns is also developing in Punjab, however, particularly following Wednesday's suicide bombing against police and military intelligence offices in the Punjabi capital Lahore, which killed at least 23 people and wounded over 200. The offices of the notorious Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) were damaged and the police emergency-response building was flattened.

Just months after Obama announced his policy of an AfPak war and demanded the Pakistani government hurl its military against the Taliban-controlled Pashtun areas, the result is the steady drift of the country toward civil war and communal conflict.



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