

Obama's AfPak war engulfs Pakistan's Swat Valley

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23 May 2009

A humanitarian catastrophe is taking place in areas of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP), as a result of the Obama administration's expansion of the occupation of Afghanistan into the so-called "AfPak war".

Over the past seven years, ethnic Pashtun Islamist movements in NWFP and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have lent assistance to the resistance being waged against the American-led forces in Afghanistan by the Pashtun-based Taliban, including by disrupting US and NATO supply routes through Pakistan.

On Washington's insistence, the Pakistani government of President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has ordered the military to embark on operations to crush the militants. In late April, Pakistani forces deployed into the Lower Dir and Buner districts of NWFP to drive out a small number who had moved into the area from their strongholds to the north, in the Swat Valley district.

Since May 8, the operation, which now involves up to 18,000 Pakistani troops, backed by air support and heavy artillery, has extended deep inside the Swat Valley. Over the past two weeks they have engaged in a series of battles against the vastly outnumbered and outgunned Islamist fighters.

There is virtually no independent reporting from the conflict zone. Most information coming out of Swat is sourced directly from the military, making its accuracy questionable.

What is clear, however, is that the assault into Buner, Lower Dir and the Swat Valley has rapidly degenerated into the savage collective punishment of entire Pashtun communities. Hundreds of thousands of terrified civilians have taken to the roads to get out of the conflict zone. By the beginning of this week, the United Nations had registered 1.45 million internally displaced persons.

The exodus from just these three districts is becoming the greatest displacement of civilians on the Indian subcontinent since the 1947 partition of the British Raj into India and Pakistan. Tens of thousands of people have found themselves in squalid refugee camps, without adequate food, water and sanitation. Peasant farmers have had to flee right at the time when they need to

harvest their crops, setting the stage for severe food shortages and malnutrition later in the year.

A factor in the mass evacuation is the sheer brutality with which the Pakistani military waged an offensive in the nearby tribal agencies of Bajaur and Mohmand last year. Scores of towns and villages, including the major town of Loe Sam, were indiscriminately reduced to rubble in order to dislodge Taliban fighters. The government claims that over 1,500 militants were killed, while relief agencies estimate that over 500,000 people were forced from their homes. There is no estimate on the number of civilian deaths.

The depopulation of the Swat Valley is a conscious policy aimed at creating the best conditions for the military to slaughter the anti-government guerrillas there as well.

Reports indicate that a three-pronged offensive is underway to trap as many militants as possible in the central Swat city of Mingora. Army columns have pushed through Buner and Lower Dir and entered Swat from the south. Another column is moving through Swat from the north, while special forces units were dropped deep in the mountains to force Islamists out of the western Pechoar Valley. In one bloody two-week battle for control of a mountain ridge known as Biny Baba Ziarat, the military claims to have slaughtered 150 Taliban, including boys no older than 14.

While the details are sketchy, the military has also waged significant battles to take control of a number of Swat towns, as well as the strategic bridges and roads linking Mingora with the outside world. It is already claiming that it has killed over 1,100 militants, at the cost of some 60 soldiers. Over recent days, troops have been fighting street-to-street battles in the town of Kanju, on the outskirts of Mingora proper.

An Al Jazeera video shot on May 16 near Mingora showed helicopter gunships attacking highways and other targets; children playing among partially demolished homes; and the potholes caused by the controlled explosion of mines placed by militants on the roads.

The description of the situation in Mingora is reminiscent of Fallujah in November 2004, prior to the murderous US assault that

destroyed the Iraqi city and left thousands dead.

Mingora previously had a population of some 250,000. Human Rights Watch (HRW) has been told that as few as 10,000 people remain. The Pakistani government has provided a similar estimate, but declared those remaining are all “Taliban sympathisers,” in order to justify a massacre in advance.

HRW reported that Mingora has not had electricity since the offensive began, and hospitals and health facilities are not operating. Now, the army is cutting off food supplies. The city is believed to be defended by several thousand fighters, who have few heavy weapons and are being repeatedly pounded by air strikes and artillery bombardments.

Spelling out the intentions of the military, Major General Sajad Ghani told the Associated Press: “The noose is tightening around them. Their routes of escape have been cut off. It’s just a question of time before they are eliminated.”

The militants in Swat are followers of the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), or the Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law. While TNSM has ideological affinities with both the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban led by Baitullah Mehsud, it is a local organisation. It gained support in the district as a backlash against both Islamabad’s support for the US invasion of Afghanistan and anger over the endemic poverty that faces the majority of people in what was once one of the country’s premier tourist locations and playgrounds for Pakistan’s rich.

TNSM’s leaders, cleric Sufi Mohammad and his son-in-law Maulana Fazlullah, used a network of FM radio stations to combine Islamist preaching with populist calls for wealth redistribution and denunciations of the Pakistani government’s neglect of the poor. After several years of fighting, the Pakistani government agreed to a ceasefire with TNSM in February which accepted that its version of Islamic law could be imposed in the Swat Valley.

Over the following weeks, the TNSM sought to expand its influence to the neighbouring district of Buner, which is located only 100 kilometres to the north of Islamabad. This led to exaggerated claims by the Obama administration and in Western newspapers that the Pakistani government had allowed the “Taliban” to grow so strong that they were threatening to take over the country’s capital. The purpose of the accusation was to pressure Zardari and Gilani into unleashing the military to crush the spread of Islamist influence.

The government has made clear that the offensive to destroy TNSM is only the first stage of a campaign of military violence on behalf of the Obama administration. The Pakistani ruling elite fears being denied the international financial assistance they need to stave off economic collapse. At present, the Pakistani state is being kept afloat by loans from the International Monetary Fund

and aid from the US and Japan.

Zardari told the British *Sunday Times* on May 17: “We’re going to go into Waziristan, all these regions, with army operations. Swat is just the start. It’s a larger war to fight.” He went on to appeal for \$1 billion in emergency assistance aid. Thus far, the US and other powers have agreed to provide just \$224 million.

The Pakistani Taliban strongholds in North and South Waziristan are of the greatest strategic concern to US occupation forces fighting in Afghanistan. Afghan fighters are known to use these tribal agencies, which are virtually outside the control of the Pakistani government, as safe havens and supply points.

The US military has launched repeated missile attacks on targets inside Waziristan using unmanned Predator drones. Illegal under international law, the strikes have resulted in the deaths of over 700 civilians but have only killed a handful of alleged Taliban leaders and had little impact on the cross-border movements of anti-occupation fighters.

A ground assault into Waziristan will see the Pakistani military in battle against the large Pashtun tribal forces loyal to Baitullah Mehsud and the Afghan Haqqani network. Periodic fighting since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan has resulted in the deaths of over 1,000 troops and unknown numbers of militants.

The Pakistani Taliban has responded to the threatened offensive with an ultimatum to the government that it has until May 25 to withdraw its troops from South Waziristan, end the Predator attacks and allow traffic in and out unchecked. Reports suggest Islamist fighters are strengthening defensive positions in anticipation of a military attack.

Fear of an offensive has triggered the beginnings of another mass civilian exodus. Several thousand Pashtun tribal families have arrived over recent days to take refuge in NWFP towns such as Tank, to the south of Waziristan. Officials cited by the *Dawn* newspaper on May 20 reported that 5,000 tents have been sent to the area in preparation for the influx of over 200,000 civilians.



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