

AfPak war depopulates and devastates north-west Pakistan

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A little over a month ago, the Pakistani government acquiesced to the demands of the Obama administration to use brute force to eradicate radical Islamist influence in the north-west of the country, as part of the so-called AfPak war to secure American interests in Central Asia. The human cost and long-term political consequences are now becoming clear.

The Pakistani military claimed over the weekend that it had largely shattered the armed opposition in the Swat Valley, Lower Dir and Buner districts of North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

The pivotal victory has been the seizure of Mingora, the largest city in the Swat Valley. After a week or more of fighting, Pakistani troops reportedly control most of the central business district and the surrounding suburbs. Military spokesmen claim that after the insurgents lost 286 dead, the survivors escaped and have shaved off their trade-mark beards so as to melt into the civilian population.

Journalists and camera crews have been given controlled access to Mingora since Wednesday and been able to file both print and video reports on the state of the city. Al Jazeera footage, for example, showed abandoned streets apart from Pakistani troops, and numerous damaged or destroyed buildings where the Islamist fighters had allegedly manned firing positions.

The Pakistani *Dawn* reported: “The town of over 300,000 people, once a hub for tourists, was as silent as a graveyard because of a curfew and massive displacement. Helicopters were hovering and security forces were guarding the main intersections. Markets wore a deserted look with many buildings and shops carrying marks of shells and bullets, showing the intensity of the fighting. Hotels and shops were also targeted.”

According to the *Dawn* and various news agencies, Mingora’s electricity grid and telecommunications network has been damaged; water services and sewage systems are dysfunctional; the police force has largely deserted; and there are severe food shortages. It is unlikely therefore that Mingora’s hundreds of thousands of displaced citizens can return in the near future.

Fighting is still reportedly taking place in areas around the

central Swat town of Kalam and in the mountainous areas in the west of the district. The Secretary of Defence, Syed Athar Ali, told Reuters on Sunday: “Hopefully within the next two to three days these pockets of resistance will be cleared.” Overall, the Pakistani government claims that more than 1,200 anti-government fighters have been killed. Less than 100 have been captured, suggesting a “take no prisoners” policy has been applied.

Sufi Mohammad and Maulana Fazlullah, the main leaders of the Swat Islamist movement which is often wrongly described as belonging to the Taliban, have not been reported killed or captured. The Swat Islamists belong to Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), or the Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law, which has led a local insurrection largely driven by anger over inequality and poverty.

There is no estimate of how many civilians have lost their lives as a result of the military offensive against TNSM. Government claims that they are negligible, however, are contradicted by the few on-the-spot reports coming out of Buner, Lower Dir and the Swat Valley.

A *Washington Post* report on May 27, for example, quoted internally displaced persons (IDPs) claiming they had witnessed multiple civilian fatalities caused by military bombing. A man from Lower Dir claimed 340 homes in his village had been destroyed by an air attack.

Just in the town of Dager, in Buner district, the Red Cross has treated 240 war wounded. A hospital in Peshawar had taken in 50 in one week. The Pakistan military reported that it has treated 6,177 patients at hospitals near Islamabad and 1,371 at another facility.

The number of wounded indicates a significant death toll. Without timely medical treatment, a large proportion of people injured by shrapnel, bullets or burns generally die from shock, blood loss or infection.

Underscoring the social conditions that lie behind the Islamist-led rebellions against the government, the UN’s World Food Program reported on Sunday that 45 million of Pakistan’s 172 million people are undernourished, with the worst conditions

facing people in the less developed regions of the tribal agencies, NWFP, Balochistan and parts of Sindh. In some areas, close to one third of the population are undernourished. Poverty has soared since the 1990s, when 26 million were considered so poor they could not adequately feed themselves.

Social conditions have been made vastly worse by the military operation in NWFP. It has not only emptied Mingora, but driven out most of the ethnic Pashtun population in the three districts targeted. The current UN estimate is that 2.4 million people have been internally displaced in just over a month, making it the largest displacement on the Indian subcontinent since the 1947 partition.

The mass exodus has taken place during the harvest season, meaning that thousands of small farmers who could barely subsist before the offensive have not been able to bring in their crops. As well, large numbers of livestock have died or been lost.

As many as 500,000 IDPs are sheltering with relatives or sympathetic strangers in the district of Mardan, to the south of the war zone. Hundreds of thousands have sought refuge with their families in Peshawar, the capital of NWFP, or in neighbouring districts. Large numbers have fled even further, seeking sanctuary outside NWFP in major cities such as Karachi, the main city in Sindh province and Pakistan's financial and economic hub.

The people supporting the IDPs are being plunged into hardship. Numerous households are sheltering four or five displaced families, with people sleeping 10 to 15 to a room and as many as 35 sharing a single toilet. Graham Strong, of World Vision, told the Pakistani International News: "They are sharing their homes, food, clothes and water. They are poor already and are making themselves poorer in the process. As the disaster continues, hosts are having to sell their land, cattle and other assets at far less than market value to keep providing for their guests."

Tens of thousands of IDPs have been forced into overcrowded and unsanitary refugee camps. A tent city in Malakand district, which borders the Swat Valley, is housing up to 50,000 people. A UN camp on the outskirts of Peshawar has taken in 50,000 to 70,000. Similar-sized camps have been established in the Mardan and Swabi districts.

As well as the immense human cost, the assault into the Swat Valley is fueling ethnic tensions. The arrival of Pashtun IDPs in Sindh has been met with reactionary strikes and protests by Sindhi chauvinists, who have demanded that the refugees be forcibly prevented from entering the province. In Karachi, which has a minority Pashtun population of some 3 million living among 18 million people, there is the danger of extensive communalist conflict.

The military operations have also provoked revenge attacks. Security force installations in Lahore were bombed last Wednesday, killing some 30 people. The following day, a bomb

was detonated at a market in Peshawar and a suicide bomber attacked a police checkpoint in the NWFP town of Dera Ismail Khan.

The violence, instability and suffering will only escalate if, as appears increasingly likely, the government bows to US demands to carry out a full-scale offensive against the strongholds of the Pakistani Taliban in the tribal agencies of South and North Waziristan.

The two agencies, which are almost entirely under the control of anti-government militias, are used as a safe haven by Pashtun fighters from over the border in Afghanistan who are resisting the US/NATO occupation of that country. While targets in the agencies are being repeatedly bombed by unmanned US Predator drones, the cross-border movement has barely been disrupted.

An unnamed Western security official working in Pakistan told the McClatchy news agency on the weekend: "Waziristan is at the heart of Western counter-terrorism interests in this region." A Pakistani onslaught on the militants in Waziristan, he said, would "hit the sweet spot for us".

Javed Hussain, a former commander of Pakistani special forces, told McClatchy that a "hammer-and-anvil" operation was being contemplated. US troops would deploy in force as the "anvil," sealing the Afghan border, while Pakistani forces moved into Waziristan as the hammer.

Pakistani troops—not American—will therefore serve as Obama's cannon fodder in bloody battles with an estimated 15,000 Taliban fighters. In exchange, the venal Pakistani ruling elites represented by President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Gilani will get the financial assistance they need to stave off economic collapse.



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