

US proxy war continues in north-west Pakistan

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The arrival of Obama administration special envoy Richard Holbrooke in Pakistan on Wednesday serves to underscore that the massive military operation taking place in the country's north-west is a proxy war on behalf of US imperialism. As part of completing the transformation of Afghanistan into a client-state in Central Asia, Obama is demanding that the Pakistani government suppress the local Islamist movements that lend support to the Afghan resistance over the border.

As many as 20,000 Pakistani troops and other security forces are now involved in an offensive to secure the three districts of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) known as the Malakand Division—Buner, Lower Dir and Swat Valley. The target is the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), or the Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law, which largely took control of Malakand over the past two years.

The TNSM has gained support primarily as a result of the desperate poverty of the population and the outrage among ethnic Pashtuns in the NWFP and Pakistan's tribal agencies over the US invasion of neighbouring Afghanistan. Numbers of TNSM loyalists from the Swat Valley are believed to have crossed the border to assist the guerrilla war being waged against the US and NATO forces occupying that country.

Holbrooke's talks with President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Gilani on Wednesday were essentially to insist that the offensive against the TNSM continue, regardless of the social consequences for millions of people in NWFP or even the political costs for the Pakistani government.

The Pakistani military operations have the character of indiscriminate collective punishment against the ethnic Pashtun population of the region. Towns and villages have

been bombed from the air and ground in order to force civilians to flee. Where advancing troops have found civilians, they have ordered them out of their homes. Thousands of semi-subsistence farmers have been compelled to abandon their fields and livestock at the time when they need to harvest their crops, creating the conditions for intense hardship later in the year.

The number of internally displaced persons is currently estimated to be as high as 2.5 million. The bulk of the displaced have found temporary shelter with relatives or sympathetic strangers, but at least 200,000 have been forced into overcrowded and squalid refugee camps. Sweltering summer temperatures, combined with shortages of fresh water, are heightening the danger of disease outbreaks.

Over the weekend, the Pakistani military claimed full control of Mingora, the main city in the Swat Valley. The few journalists who were able to visit the city described it as a virtual ghost town. Most of the 300,000 inhabitants had fled. Fewer than 20,000 remained, in many cases because they were elderly or infirm and could not move. Numerous buildings and homes had been destroyed or damaged as a result of weeks of fighting.

Since late April, the military claims to have killed over 1,300 Islamists—and taken just 50 prisoners. Some 90 soldiers have died. There is no estimate of how many civilians have lost their lives or been wounded, but reports filed by aid agencies and journalists suggest the number could be substantial.

Fazil Tezara of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) told Reuters on Monday: "A lot of people have been wounded in the fighting but there are no medical services in many areas like Mingora. Wounded people are trying to get to the nearest hospital in Timergara [the main city in the adjoining district of Lower Dir] but that is a seven-day trek through mountains and people are dying on the way, and their bodies

are just lying there.”

A Mingora resident who stayed in the city during the fighting told the Associated Press on Sunday: “We have been starving for many days. We have been cooking tree leaves to keep ourselves alive. Thank god it is over. We need food. We need help. We want peace.”

An International Committee of the Red Cross spokesperson, Sebastian Brack, voiced concern over the tens of thousands of people still trapped in parts of the Swat Valley. “There is a great deal of anxiety in Swat,” he said, “as people have been cut off from the rest of the world for several weeks and they have no idea what is going on. Health supplies are virtually non-existent and there are numerous cases of wounded people. [There is] no water and food, no electricity and phone lines are down, so we need to start relief work there as soon as possible.”

Even limited relief work is being hindered by the lack of resources and access to many areas. A UN appeal for \$543 million in international contributions has received just \$120 million. Holbrooke announced on Wednesday that the US would contribute a further \$200 million but did not specify a timeframe. During visits to the Middle East over the weekend, he is expected to pressure the oil-rich Arab Gulf states to make substantial contributions to shore up the Pakistani government.

Long before any assistance reaches the millions of displaced, however, their plight is set to worsen. A Pakistani Army spokesman, Major General Athar Abbas, told the media on Thursday that it would take at least another two months to fully secure the Swat Valley and that troops would have to occupy the district for as long as a year.

The main TNSM leaders, cleric Sufi Mohammad and his son-in-law Maulana Fazlullah, have not been killed or captured, despite rewards of over \$US60,000 being placed on their heads. Radio intercepts seen by the *New York Times* earlier this week indicate that Fazlullah is alive, hiding somewhere in the Swat Valley and still encouraging his loyalists to continue resistance.

Throughout this week, ongoing military operations have hunted down militants who are believed to have fled from Mingora into the mountainous countryside. On Wednesday, Pakistani forces said they had secured the town of Charbagh, some 30 kilometres north of Mingora, and captured a large quantity of weapons and explosives. Clashes have also been reported between Charbagh and the town of Kalam, in the

far north of the valley.

The ongoing fighting means that millions of people will not be able to return to their homes. As the families sheltering them run out of money and food, more and more will have to seek sanctuary in refugee camps. Daniel Baker of the UN Population Fund warned yesterday: “With the monsoon season fast approaching, concerns are growing about an increase in avoidable sickness and death due to disease outbreaks, such as acute respiratory infection, acute diarrhoea, malaria and meningitis.”

Another UN official, Manuel Bessler, commented that in some of the camps “food and essential medicines may not be sustainable beyond early July unless the international community rapidly and generously responds to these acute needs”.

Even as the disaster unfolds in NWFP, the Pakistani military is planning a larger attack on the tribal agencies of South and North Waziristan. These areas, which border Afghanistan, are the stronghold of the Pakistani Taliban and the main safe haven for Afghan insurgents. The destruction of the Taliban in Waziristan is a major objective of US military’s plan to bring Afghanistan under control. It is the key demand of the Obama administration and would have been communicated again to the Pakistani government by Holbrooke.

Aid agencies operating to the south of Waziristan are making preparations for a flood of refugees if and when the military launches an offensive.

Michael Young, a director for the International Rescue Committee, told Reuters this week: “All the signs are that this conflict will escalate in the next couple of weeks. There is real potential for a humanitarian catastrophe. We’re preparing the best we can, given the limited funding currently available.... We’re planning on the basis of upwards of half-a-million more people forced to flee their homes in the tribal agencies.”



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