

Pakistani military begins offensive in Waziristan

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23 June 2009

Pakistani troops have moved in force into South Waziristan, beginning operations that are expected to escalate into a full-scale effort to drive the Islamist Tehrik-e-Taliban movement from the tribal agency and prevent Afghan insurgents using it as a safe haven to strike at US and NATO occupation forces over the border.

The offensive follows bloody fighting and mass civilian displacement in late April and May in the Swat Valley and other districts of North West Frontier Province (NWFP), and operations last year against the Taliban in the tribal agencies of Bajaur and Mohmand.

Reports over the past week suggest that the Pakistani army is establishing a defensive cordon several hundred kilometres long, stretching along the main road from Wana, the capital of South Waziristan in the south-west of the agency, to the town of Jandola, in the north-east.

Pakistani troops with tanks and artillery have been deployed from bases outside Jandola. Other army units have moved north from Wana and occupied high ground past the town of Madijan. Aircraft are protecting the roads. In all, at least 20,000 soldiers, Frontier Corp paramilitary personnel and police are involved.

The US military considers South and North Waziristan as the most critical areas of Pakistan to wrest from the control of the Taliban. In South Waziristan, Tehrik-e-Taliban leader and local warlord, Baitullah Mehsud, can mobilise as many as 15,000 fighters from among the Pashtun tribes, on the basis of traditional tribal loyalties, religious beliefs and popular opposition to the US invasion of Afghanistan. North Waziristan is the base of operations for the Afghan Haqqani network—one of the most effective Taliban-linked insurgent movements

fighting the US-led occupation.

Houses and compounds allegedly occupied by Taliban targets have been repeatedly bombed in both agencies by unmanned American Predator drones. Last Sunday, missiles were fired at a home near the South Waziristan town of Makeen. Five people allegedly linked to Baitullah Mehsud were reportedly killed. The Obama administration has authorised at least 20 Predator attacks this year inside Pakistani territory—all in violation of international law. The strikes, however, have done little to disrupt the Taliban. Instead, the attacks have killed over 700 civilians and fueled support for the Islamists.

US special envoy Richard Holbrooke visited Islamabad earlier this month to repeat the Obama administration's demands for the Pakistani government launch a ground offensive into the Waziristans. This week, as operations get underway, Obama's National Security Advisor James Jones is travelling to Pakistan's capital. The purpose of the visit, according to the White House, is to "follow-up on the implementation of our new, comprehensive strategy".

The Pakistani military's aim appears to be to seal off the Taliban-held areas of South Waziristan from NWFP to the east and Balochistan province to the south, before launching a major assault. The only escape routes for the militants would be to the west over the border into Afghanistan, where they will be targeted by US and NATO forces, or northward into North Waziristan—the logical next target for attack.

The other aim of the cordon is to prevent the Taliban launching attacks in other areas of Pakistan. Since the government ordered troops into the Swat Valley, militants have carried out or attempted suicide bombings in

Peshawar, Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi.

A Pakistani security expert told *Time* magazine last week: “They [the Taliban] will try to paralyse the country by striking at the major cities and business hubs.” Anticipating greater violence as troops move into South Waziristan, the United Nations has declared the country “unsafe” for the families of its representatives and urged them to leave.

The killing in South Waziristan has already begun. On Friday and Saturday, Pakistani officials reported that F-16s, helicopter gunships and ground artillery had destroyed a Taliban training camp, two seminaries and three houses allegedly belonging to Islamist leaders. They claimed that at least 50 Taliban militants were killed, though there is no means of verifying the government casualty reports.

Clashes were also reported with militants attempting to block the Wana-Jandola road. Troops are said to be working to clear the highway of the debris, mines and roadside bombs. In North Waziristan, Taliban fighters moved out of their mountain strongholds over the weekend and launched rocket attacks on several military bases. They also ambushed an army supply convoy, wounding three soldiers.

The offensive is likely to result in substantial losses for the Pakistani army and the Taliban. The greatest impact, however, will be on civilians. Most of Baitullah Mehsud’s fighters live with their families in relatively isolated and poverty-stricken villages in mountainous regions, eking out an existence by subsistence pastoralist activity and agriculture. Like the US forces in Afghanistan, the Pakistani military relies almost entirely on air strikes to attack remote localities.

One of the operational commanders during the Swat Valley offensive, Major General Sajjad Ghani, spelt out the murderous intentions of the Pakistani military in the Waziristans. He told a press conference this week: “The hard-core [Islamists], there is only one thing. You have to kill them. They are like a mad dog, and what can you do with a mad dog? You must kill it.”

According to a government spokesman, 45,000 people had left the agency before the cordon was thrown up. This suggests that there are still close to 400,000 civilians

trapped in what the military now treats as a free fire zone.

Fighting is still continuing in the areas that were targeted by earlier government offensives. Air strikes were launched over the weekend against an alleged Taliban base in Bajaur agency, which the military claimed to have cleared of anti-government fighters more than five months ago. Clashes also took place in the Upper Dir district of NWFP between Taliban militants and local villagers who have enlisted in a government-sponsored lashkar, or tribal militia.

At his press conference, General Ghani reported that the army had still not fully secured the Swat Valley and that as many as 3,000 militants and leaders had escaped the offensive. He suggested that they may have gone to either the Waziristans or Afghanistan. While the figure cannot be verified, Ghani claimed that 1,600 militants and some 100 soldiers had died in eight weeks of combat.

Large numbers of civilians have been displaced by the fighting. Some 500,000 fled from Bajaur and Mohmand last year and have not been able to return to their homes. A further 2.5 million people, predominantly ethnic Pashtuns, were forced out of Swat and other districts of NWFP in the last several months. It is believed that 80 percent found temporary refuge with relatives, friends or sympathetic strangers, but their resources are running out.

At least 300,000 displaced persons are crowded in unsanitary tent cities scattered across NWFP. With the number seeking shelter in the refugee camps growing each day, UN officials and relief agencies are warning of disease epidemics as the monsoon season begins.



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