

Violence sweeps northwest Pakistan in wake of Mehsud assassination

James Cogan
15 August 2009

The civil war between the US-backed government of President Asif Ali Zardari and Islamist and tribal militants is escalating in the wake of the August 5 assassination of Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud by a US Predator drone in South Waziristan. The killing has been followed by a series of further Predator attacks, armed clashes, murders, bombings and rocket attacks across northwest Pakistan.

On Tuesday, three missiles fired by unmanned American drones slaughtered as many as 14 alleged militants in a village just seven kilometres from where Mehsud was killed. The US military has stepped up Predator flights over South Waziristan, calculating that the tribal and Taliban leadership will be holding meetings to determine who will replace Baitullah as the head of both the Mehsud tribe and the umbrella Islamist movement in the region, Tehrik-e-Taliban.

The Mehsud and the Taliban are carrying out sweeping retaliation for the killing of their leader, targeting tribes that have collaborated with the Islamabad government against them.

On Wednesday, as many as 1,000 Mehsud tribal fighters launched an assault on the stronghold of one rival, Turkistan Bhattani, in the South Waziristan town of Jandola. Fighting raged for several hours, with the Taliban using rockets and mortars to level as many as 40 houses.

Pakistani Army helicopter gunships and ground artillery had to be called in to drive off the attackers. At least 70 members of Bhattani's militia were killed and scores more were wounded. Taliban losses are unknown but are believed to have been substantial. The military claims at least 15 militants were killed when its artillery destroyed three vehicles attempting to leave the area.

Pakistani forces responded on Thursday with a major helicopter gunship attack on the alleged bases of Baitullah Mehsud's cousin and possible successor, Hakimullah Mehsud, in the tribal agencies of Kurrum and Orakzai, to the north of South Waziristan. The government claimed that a number of houses were reduced to rubble and that at least 12 militants were killed.

The Taliban hit back throughout the day with targeted assassinations. In the tribal agency of Bajaur, two commanders of military-linked militias were seized by militants and

executed. In Waziristan itself, a suicide-bomber riding an explosive-laden motorbike killed pro-government tribal leader Malik Khadeen and several of his lieutenants in Wana, the summer capital of the agency. Khadeen's tribal militia, with military backing, has held Wana from the Taliban for the past several years,

The Pakistani establishment's fear that Taliban revenge attacks can reach every corner of the country was palpably demonstrated yesterday, during the celebrations to commemorate the country's establishment on August 14, 1947. Tens of thousands of troops and police were deployed throughout major cities such as Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi and Peshawar, manning road-blocks and pedestrian checkpoints and guarding government buildings and military installations. In many areas, Independence Day events were kept to a minimum.

While there were no incidents in most of the country, militants in northwest Pakistan launched a rocket barrage against a military base in Peshawar and attacked army bases in the tribal agencies of North Waziristan and Khyber. In the province of Balochistan, bombings rocked the capital Quetta and the towns of Hub and Mach, and electricity towers were destroyed in two other locations. It is unknown if the attacks were carried out by Taliban-linked militants or by ethnic Baloch separatists who have waged a decades-long insurgency against the Pakistani government.

The scale of the civil war and the hatred that has been generated against both the Islamabad government and the US have passed a threshold that makes any negotiated settlement to the violence unlikely.

Under pressure from Washington, particularly since the Obama administration took office, the Islamabad government has ordered the military to wage brutal offensives against the predominantly ethnic Pashtun population of the northwest. The objective is to eliminate the various Islamist and Pashtun tribal militias that oppose Pakistan's close alliance with American imperialism and provide support to the anti-US insurgency being fought by the Taliban in the Pashtun-populated provinces of southern Afghanistan.

The result has been massive loss of life and displacement. During the April-May offensive in the Swat Valley and other Malakand districts of the North-West Frontier Province, the

military forced over two million people from their homes in crushing an Islamist rebellion in the area led by cleric Maulana Fazlullah and his Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TSNM) movement.

The Pakistani Human Rights Commission, which just completed a fact-finding mission in Swat Valley, issued a condemnation of the operation this week, citing eye-witness accounts of extra-judicial killings and reprisals by the military. Several mass graves have allegedly been discovered. The area has been left devastated, with large numbers of houses damaged and infrastructure destroyed. Months after the offensive, over 1.2 million displaced persons are still unable to return.

As many as 500,000 people displaced last year by the military from the Bajaur and Mohmand tribal agencies are still living in squalid camps or with relatives elsewhere in Pakistan. Yesterday, the 2,300 families at one camp on the outskirts of Peshawar held a protest against the Independence Day celebrations, raising black flags instead of the Pakistani flag. Badsha Gul, a spokesman for the displaced, told the Pakistani *News International* they were protesting because “hundreds of our people were killed and our houses were destroyed while crops were damaged in the military operation”.

The Pakistani government is sending out strong signals that it intends to finally bow to Washington’s demands and order tens of thousands of troops to invade South Waziristan and mount a bloody confrontation with the Mehsud tribe and the Pakistani Taliban. The Obama administration, which has sent tens of thousands more troops to Afghanistan in a “surge” patterned after the similar Pentagon operation in Iraq, is anxious that Pakistani forces bear a large part of the burden of carrying the fight to the Taliban.

Owais Ahmed Ghani, the governor of the North-West Frontier Province, declared at an Independence Day event yesterday: “Areas beyond state control are being reduced. We have adopted a ‘hold-the-line’ policy and there will be no more retreating. There was talk that Peshawar could fall any day. Today, we have secured it. Similarly Malakand in the north is also under government control. The army is now moving to secure the south [Waziristan].”

The United Nations refugee agency has begun preparing camps for the tens of thousands of civilians who are expected to be driven from their homes, on top of over 45,000 who have already fled South Waziristan. UN spokesman Martin Mogwanja told a press conference on Wednesday: “The estimates that we have now and the working figure that we are using is that the number of displaced could rise somewhere between 90,000 and 150,000.”

The escalation of the violence can only have the most explosive political and social consequences. The majority of the Pakistani working class and rural poor do not support the reactionary aims of the Taliban and other Islamists. They are acutely conscious, however, that the Pakistan People’s Party-

led coalition government is functioning as nothing more than a proxy for the Obama administration in its attempt to place Afghanistan and the Central Asian region under US imperialist domination. The only beneficiaries of the war are the country’s corrupt business, military and landed elite, who are benefiting from billions of dollars in US pay-outs each year, while the mass of the population endures worsening poverty.

A recent opinion poll, commissioned by Al Jazeera, demonstrated the extent of the opposition—59 percent of the 2,600 respondents said the greatest threat to Pakistan was the United States and 67 percent stated they opposed the American air strikes taking place in the country’s northwest.

The editor-in-chief of the Pakistani *Daily Mail*, Makhdoom Babar, told Al Jazeera: “This is a fact. The hatred of the US is growing very quickly because of these drone attacks. Maybe the intelligence agencies, the military channels, consider them productive, but for the general public it is controversial. The drone attacks are causing collateral damage.” Hundreds of civilians have been killed in the US strikes.

Despite the indiscriminate and terrorist nature of Taliban reprisals, which have also killed numerous innocent civilians, just 41 percent said they supported the government’s military operations against the Islamists. Barely 11 percent declared support for President Asif Ali Zardari’s policies, while 42 percent stated disapproval. When asked who should lead the country, only 9 percent named Zardari.

Zardari, the successor to the US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf, has not only increased Pakistan’s support for the US war in Afghanistan. His government has bowed to demands from the IMF for the elimination of energy subsidies, a stepped-up privatisation program and other anti-working class measures.



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