

Pakistan descends deeper into civil war

Peter Symonds
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As the Pakistani military gets set to launch a major offensive into the tribal agency of South Waziristan, Islamist militants carried out coordinated high-profile attacks yesterday on police facilities in the city of Lahore.

Teams of gunmen disguised as police officers struck two police training centres and the provincial headquarters of the Federal Investigation Agency. At least 28 people were killed, including 19 police officers. Two of the targets had already been attacked in the previous 18 months.

Two further attacks took place yesterday in the North West Frontier Province. A suicide car bombing at a police station in Kohat killed 11 people—three police officers and eight civilians. A smaller bomb outside a housing complex for government employees in the provincial capital of Peshawar killed a child and wounded nine other people.

Yesterday's attacks follow an audacious raid on the army's headquarters in Rawalpindi over the weekend that led to a 22-hour standoff. At least six soldiers, including a brigadier-general and a colonel, were killed in the fighting. Previously, a car bomb exploded in a marketplace in Peshawar on October 12, killing 52 people and injuring more than 100. On October 5, a suicide bomb attack at the UN's World Food Program headquarters in Islamabad killed five aid workers.

Responding to yesterday's raids, Interior Minister Rehman Malik declared: "The enemy has started a guerrilla war." In fact, the country has been in a state of undeclared civil war since the Pakistani government, under intense pressure from Washington, ordered the military into the Swat Valley and neighbouring districts in April.

Now the military is primed to carry out a similar operation in South Waziristan, where it alleges most of the recent "terrorist" attacks were planned. The Obama administration has been pressing for months for a major Pakistani offensive into the tribal agency, which is used as a refuge by insurgents fighting the US occupation of Afghanistan.

While a fully-fledged ground assault is yet to take place, the army has moved troops, tanks and artillery into position and is constructing strategic roads in the Mamo mountains. Air and artillery bombardment on alleged insurgents intensified this week, partly in response to the attack on army headquarters last weekend.

"We are targetting militant hideouts with jet fighters and helicopter gunships in the first phase of an operation in South Waziristan," Tariq Hayat, a top government official responsible for the tribal border areas, told the *Dawn*. At least 27 people were killed in heavy bombing yesterday following similar raids on Tuesday and Wednesday in at least five separate areas.

On Wednesday night, eight people were killed in an aerial attack on a cave shelter in the Spinkal area. Pakistani intelligence officials insisted that the dead were all insurgents, but local tribesmen told the media that all the victims were civilians, including three women and three children, who had abandoned their homes to seek shelter.

The stream of people fleeing the tribal agency is accelerating. According to the Associated Press, an estimated 200,000 people have left South Waziristan since August. About half of those have registered as displaced persons. South Waziristan's exact population is unknown, but the figure is generally put at around 500,000.

Mohammed Shahbaz, a businessman, told *Spiegel Online*: "Life here is becoming increasingly difficult; we expect war could break out anytime. Even without war we have problems. The military is patrolling everywhere and there are controls on every street. It is getting more difficult by the day to get hold of food and other everyday goods."

Naimatullah Khan, a police officer, told the Associated Press (AP) that the exodus had grown this week. Around 80 vehicles carrying refugees are passing each day through the Chonda checkpoint on the edge of the region. Haji Ayub

Mehsud, who had fled along back roads with his six children, told AP that the intensified bombing left him no choice. “It is difficult for local people to stay there in peace. I had to bring out my family,” he said.

Most refugees have moved into safer districts such as Dera Ismail Khan and Tank. There is no sign that the government has made any preparation to look after them. Hundreds of thousands of displaced persons who fled the Swat Valley earlier this year were housed in squalid camps that lacked sufficient food, water and electricity. A local official in Dera Ismail Khan told *Spiegel Online*: “When the army attacks begin, we expect a mass exodus from South Waziristan. Where do we accommodate and provide for all these people?”

When the ground offensive will begin remains unclear. On Monday, Interior Minister Rehman Malik said that political leaders had given the go-ahead, but the timing was up to the army chief of staff. However, the government and the military have been talking about the impending offensive for weeks. The apparent hesitancy is one indication of the internal political crisis being generated by the widening conflict with the Taliban and allied Islamist groups.

In military terms, the offensive in South Waziristan could prove to be very costly. Three previous operations ended in failure. The army has reportedly marshalled 28,000 soldiers to confront an estimated 10,000 armed militants, who have considerable local support. Among Pashtun tribespeople in the border areas, the government is widely despised as an American puppet that is helping to shore up the US and NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

Repeated attacks by unmanned US predator drones on the Pakistani tribal agencies have only intensified popular anger. These raids have been accelerated under the Obama administration—40 have taken place since Obama was sworn in on January 20. The latest yesterday on a house in North Waziristan killed four people. While the Pakistani government publicly opposes the strikes, privately it has given the green light to the US.

Popular opposition inside Pakistan to the US occupation of Afghanistan is not limited to Pashtun border areas. Fearful of generating greater anger, the government only launched its offensive into the Swat Valley after heavy arm-twisting by Washington. A major assault in South Waziristan will only prompt further Islamist attacks in the country’s main cities and fuel deepening discontent and opposition.

Dr Hasan Askari-Rizvi, a security expert, told the *Guardian* yesterday that attacks by militants were unlikely to collapse the government. But, he warned, “If these things keep happening there will be a major crisis of confidence in the government. There is a sense of insecurity across Pakistan. You don’t know what will happen when you are walking on the streets.”

A diplomatic row over a US Congressional aid bill is another indication of the fragile situation in Pakistan. The Pakistani government was compelled to send Foreign Minister Shah Mehmoud Qureshi to Washington after the army expressed “grave concerns” about clauses in the legislation, effectively requiring US oversight that Pakistan was playing its part in Obama’s AfPak war.

The differences were patched up after Qureshi met with the bill’s sponsors Senator John Kerry and Representative Howard Berman. They issued a written statement to accompany the legislation, declaring that it should not be interpreted as implying that the US “does not fully recognise and respect the sovereignty of Pakistan.” The bill itself remained unchanged and was signed into law by Obama. Despite the lauding of US generosity, the \$7.5 billion over five years amounts to less than \$10 a year per head of population, even assuming the money is actually delivered and reaches ordinary people.

The latest attacks in Lahore only underscore the reckless character of Obama’s escalating AfPak war. As the US administration prepares to dispatch tens of thousands more American troops to the neo-colonial conflict in Afghanistan, it is pushing neighbouring Pakistan into deepening civil turmoil that can only further destabilise the entire region.



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