

Pakistani military launches offensive into South Waziristan

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Two Pakistani army divisions, supported by an array of jet fighters and helicopter gunships, began a long expected offensive into the Taliban-controlled areas of the South Waziristan tribal agency early Saturday morning. Involving at least 30,000 combat troops, plus thousands of logistical personnel, it is the largest military operation on either side of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in the Obama administration's "AfPak" war.

The roads in and out of the rugged region have been sealed off. Columns of tanks and armoured vehicles are pushing into the agency from three directions. In the north, troops are moving to surround the town of Makeen. From the east, troops are moving to secure a network of villages and surround the town of Laddah, where Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud is believed to have his headquarters. From the south, troops are pushing toward the town of Kaniguram, in the centre of South Waziristan.

Military spokesmen have claimed that American and NATO forces in Afghanistan have stepped up the monitoring of the border region adjacent to Waziristan in order to cut off a potential escape route.

Army commanders have optimistically told journalists they expect operations to last six to eight weeks and be completed before heavy winter snowfalls make large tracts of the agency inaccessible. An offensive in 2004, albeit by far fewer troops, bogged down in a stalemate within a matter of days after the army suffered heavy casualties. It ended after three months in the signing of a humiliating peace agreement with the Taliban by the Pakistan government.

The unstated military objective of the current offensive is to slaughter the estimated 10,000 to 15,000 Taliban and tribal fighters in the agency. As well as heavy combatant

losses on both sides, there are likely to be large numbers of civilian casualties. While some 150,000 people have fled the area over the past several months, some 350,000 civilians, mainly impoverished tribal farmers, have been trapped in the army dragnet.

The Pakistani government of President Asif Ali Zardari has sought to ensure the army has a free hand to carry out a bloodbath. No journalists are permitted inside the war zone. Every report on the fighting, Taliban and army casualties, and civilian casualties will be based solely on the information, misinformation and propaganda released by government or military spokesmen.

The purpose of the operation was spelt out bluntly by Interior Minister Rehman Malik following the Taliban attack on the army headquarters in Rawalpindi on October 11. Malik, indicating that an offensive in Waziristan would begin soon, declared: "I want to give a message to the Taliban that what we did with you in Swat we will do the same to you there, too."

During the offensive in the Swat Valley district of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in April and May, the military killed as many as 2,000 loyalists of a Taliban-linked Islamist movement and forced over two million people from their homes. The area is now under permanent military occupation and death squads organised by the army have allegedly murdered dozens of Taliban sympathisers.

The first Pakistani military reports on the Waziristan offensive have been predictably upbeat. The initial towns targetted in the south and east are said to have fallen with little fighting. Six Taliban anti-aircraft machine gun positions were reportedly destroyed by air strikes.

The military claimed that at least 60 Taliban fighters were killed in the first day of fighting, at the cost of five dead and 11 wounded. An army spokesman stated: “The area has been heavily mined. There are a lot of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines, but the level of resistance from the militants is not very high.”

A Taliban spokesman who phoned CNN claimed the opposite. He insisted that just one militant had been lost, while at least 68 troops had been killed in heavy clashes across the agency. The Pakistani *Dawn* newspaper was told that some 1,500 Afghan Taliban fighters were moving to South Waziristan to reinforce their Pakistani allies.

The Waziristan offensive is the latest chapter in the history of mercenary relations between the US and Pakistani governments. Since 2001, Islamabad has been prepared to wage a civil war against the ethnic Pashtun tribal communities in the north west of the country who sympathise with and aid the anti-occupation fighters over the border in Afghanistan. The Pakistan government’s motive is to ensure that US political, military and financial aid continues to flow to the country’s corrupt ruling elite.

The US military has played a major role in preparing the offensive. Predator drones have stalked Waziristan throughout this year, conducting surveillance and collecting data on militant movements and positions, and launching missile strikes on alleged Taliban leaders. A Predator killed the former Taliban leader, Baitullah Mehsud, in an attack in August.

According to the *New York Times*, the US military has recently equipped Pakistani Air Force F-16s with new imaging systems, improving their ability to hit targets. The offensive was preceded by months of air strikes and artillery bombardments to weaken Taliban defensive positions close to army bases and to try and kill as many militants as possible before the ground assault.

As troops push forward, more than 100 locations inside South Waziristan are being pounded from the air with high yield bombs and incendiary weapons delivered by the US-upgraded aircraft. The American military is said to be rushing munitions to Pakistan so its air force can sustain a murderous campaign of round-the-clock air strikes in support of ground operations.

The central role of the US military in planning and coordinating the offensive was underscored by the presence of General David Petraeus, head of US Central Command, who flew to Islamabad on Sunday to advise his Pakistani counterparts.

Petraeus was accompanied by former Democrat presidential candidate Senator John Kerry, who discussed with Pakistani government leaders the terms that Washington has placed on the provision of \$7.5 billion in non-military aid over the next five years. The controversial US demands include that the Pakistani military target the city of Quetta, in Balochistan, as well as tribal agencies such as Waziristan. US intelligence alleges that the main Afghan Taliban leadership around Mullah Omar is operating from Quetta.

The Waziristan offensive and the broader US machinations can only further destabilise Pakistan. Even if the military succeeds in killing a large number of Taliban, many others will survive to continue a guerilla-style war for years to come. Across Pakistan and internationally, the result will be a brutal cycle of retaliation by various Islamist organisations that now view themselves as at war with the government and its US sponsors. In just the last two weeks, terrorist reprisals over previous attacks have claimed more than 200 lives.

A Pakistani journalist in the NWFP town of Tank, where many civilians displaced from Waziristan have taken refuge, told the BBC: “The army can kill all the militants they want. The government has already laid the seeds of a new and more powerful wave to replace them.”



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