

Reports of indiscriminate bombing in South Waziristan

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The first five days of the Pakistani offensive against Taliban and Mehsud tribe militants in the agency of South Waziristan have produced minimal military gains and a rapidly developing humanitarian crisis as tens of thousands of terrified civilians flee the fighting.

In the northern area of South Waziristan, the army has made little progress in advancing from its base at Razmak to capture the main Taliban-held town of Makeen, just five kilometres away. The Taliban have another stronghold at the town of Ladha, which is located seven kilometres south of Makeen. Both towns are being subjected to air and ground bombardment.

The roads out of the area have been sealed by army roadblocks and the entire agency has been placed under a military curfew. Phone lines have been cut off. Civilians seeking to escape are being forced to walk out of the war zone under constant threat of attack. People from Ladha spoken to by the *Dawn* newspaper reported that a family of 12 had been killed on the roads, most likely by an air strike.

Before the offensive began on Saturday, at least 112,000 civilians had already fled South Waziristan and registered with the UN High Commission for Refugees. UN spokeswoman Barbara Billi Bierling told the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday that the “number of refugees could go up to 250,000 in the next few weeks as the conflict could go much longer”. It is feared that tens of thousands of other civilians who have fled their homes will be trapped inside the agency, without access to adequate food or shelter.

Kasheed Khan, who managed to carry his 90-year-old mother out of Makeen, told *Guardian* correspondents at

an aid station in the town of Dera Ismail Khan on Monday: “They were targeting civilians. I saw it myself. They were hitting vehicles and houses. They even demolished the main bus stand in Makeen.” Another man said: “Not a single Taliban has been targeted. It’s only civilians who have been hit.”

Fazlu Rehman, a displaced person in Dera Ismail Khan, told the Associated Press: “There is a lot of bombardment—on houses, on mosques, on madrassas [religious schools], on everything.”

A doctor, who had relatives arrive from Makeen on the weekend, told the BBC: “The winters are really harsh in Waziristan and people are trying to move out before it becomes really cold. Otherwise it might be too late. My family arrived a few days ago. It was a very difficult journey as they had to travel on foot... They had to overcome bomb explosions and curfews. They are with me now and everyone is fine, although a few people suffer from flu and exhaustion. There are 33 of us now in our house... If the war against the terrorists in Waziristan continues for a long time, how are we going to keep going?”

Troops attempting to advance from the town of Jandola, in the south-east of South Waziristan, are engaged in heavy fighting with militants around the village of Kotkai, which has the symbolic importance of being the birthplace of the new leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Hakimullah Mehsud.

A military spokesman told the *Dawn* newspaper yesterday: “The troops have yet to enter Kotkai and it seems they [the Taliban] want to defend this stronghold at all costs.” McClatchy Newspapers was told that

Mehsud tribal leaders have rejected an appeal from the head of the Pakistani military, General Ashfaq Kayani, which called on them to “rise collectively” against the Taliban and collaborate with the offensive.

Anonymous military sources also told McClatchy Newspapers that seven soldiers were killed and seven wounded in a militant counter-attack to drive the army from ground it had gained around the village. The military claims that the civilian population of 6,000 has fled—most likely to preempt criticism of the indiscriminate bombing that is reducing the entire village to rubble.

Troops are reported to have by-passed Kotkai in order to take the town of Sraragha, possibly in an attempt to link up with forces advancing from Wana, in the south-west of the agency. Troops are said to be already fighting the Taliban in the Sherwangai area near the town of Kaniguram, which is just located seven kilometres to the south of Ladha.

If successful, the pincer movement from the north, south-west and south-east will push the Taliban into a small kill zone between Ladha and Makeen. The Pakistani government has stated it will not agree to any ceasefire. Its intention is to slaughter as many of the 10,000 to 15,000 militants in South Waziristan as possible and permanently occupy their former bases and training camps.

The military claims that as many as 100 Taliban have been killed so far, at the cost of about 15 Pakistani troops. There is no official estimate of civilian casualties.

A Taliban spokesman, Azam Tariq, contacted media outlets yesterday to criticise them for only reporting government propaganda. He claimed that at least 40 soldiers had been killed in the fighting around Kotkai alone. Beyond general details, however, little of what is claimed by either side can be verified. The Pakistani government has sealed the agency off to the media, while the barbaric kidnapping and murder of journalists by Islamists meant no reporters risked entering the militant-held areas of Waziristan before the offensive began.

Across Pakistan, the Waziristan offensive has created a climate of fear and uncertainty. Taliban leaders had warned of retaliation across Pakistan if the offensive proceeded. Over the past two weeks, as many as 200 people have been killed in attacks across Pakistan, mainly on police and army facilities.

Two suicide bombers struck yesterday at a women’s cafeteria and classroom at the International Islamic University in Islamabad, killing four students and wounding as many as 42 others, mainly young women. Some public schools and universities in Punjab province had already closed for the week in response to threats. In response to the latest bombing, provincial governments in Sindh, Baluchistan and North West Frontier Province ordered public and private universities and schools to close, in some cases until next week. In Punjab, a closure has been ordered until “further notice”.

There are concerns in security circles that the ethnic Punjabi-based Islamist group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Kashmiri militant organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed have joined the Taliban to wage a war against the pro-US government of President Ali Asif Zardari. Hundreds of suspected Islamic radicals have been detained for interrogation by the security forces over the past several weeks

Military operations are also being intensified in ethnic Pashtun tribal areas outside Waziristan, which the government had claimed were brought under control by previous offensives. As many as 24 Islamist militants were reportedly killed in raids in Mohmand, Bajaur and Orakzai agencies on Monday. In the Swat Valley district of North West Frontier Province, 28 alleged Taliban were arrested during house searches.



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