

Pakistani army offensive devastates tribal communities

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The ongoing Pakistani military offensive into the tribal agency of South Waziristan is having a devastating impact on the entire civilian population. Villages and towns are literally being bombed into rubble and tens of thousands of people have been forced to flee for their lives.

The long-expected offensive began on October 18 and was preceded by months of air and ground bombardments and an economic blockade. The assault is ostensibly aimed at destroying Tehrik-i-Taliban, a Pakistani Islamist organisation based among local Pashtun tribes that supports the insurgency over the border in Afghanistan against the US-led occupation. As many as 10,000 to 15,000 Islamist and tribal fighters are believed to be in South Waziristan, including several thousand Uzbek militants who had been fighting alongside the Afghan Taliban before the 2001 US invasion.

A map showing the main towns in the agency and the general thrust of Pakistani military movements is available on the BBC web site. (Click here to view the map) The region is part of the Hindu Kush mountain range and the terrain is particularly rugged.

At least 30,000 regular army troops, drawn from two divisions, are converging on the towns of Ladha and Makeen from three directions. As they advance with tanks and armoured vehicles along the main roads, they are fighting heavy battles with militants in a succession of towns, villages and mountain passes. The weather conditions are beginning to worsen as winter sets in. Temperatures will fall to -20° Celsius (-4° Fahrenheit) within a matter of weeks.

The main success claimed by the military thus far is the capture over the weekend of Kotkai, a village in the south-east of the agency that is the birthplace of Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud. Heavy fighting raged around the village for close to a week.

Kotkai has effectively been razed to the ground. Exclusive, albeit brief, video footage of the village was acquired and broadcast by Al Jazeera, showing bombed-out houses and a

massive crater where a school once stood. Correspondent Imran Khan commented: "All the villagers can do is stand in the rubble of what was once home." Footage from a hospital in the town of Wana shows young children from the area being treated for serious wounds. (Click here to view the broadcast)

The military justified the destruction of the village by claiming that the "majority of houses had been converted into strong bunkers". It provided no evidence.

Troops have reportedly pushed at least three kilometres forward from Kotkai and taken a strategic high point where the Taliban allegedly had a series of fortified positions. The next objective in the south-east is an assault on the town of Sararogha. In the south-west, fighting is taking place along the road to the towns of Shakai and Kaniguram, which the military intends to seize before attacking the Taliban strongholds in Ladha and Makeen.

The Pakistani air force is using American-upgraded F-16s and helicopter gunships to conduct a continuous campaign of indiscriminate aerial assaults, particularly on the two main towns.

Desperate civilians are pouring out of Taliban-held areas for the safety of food distribution points in government-controlled centres such as Wana, Dera Ismail Khan and Tank. A UN refugee agency spokeswoman, Arianne Rummery, told Al Jazeera that over 125,000 people had registered as being displaced since October 13. "They join the other 80,500 people who were previously registered," she said. "So this means the total registered caseload in terms of families is 28,242, which is around 206,000 people." The total population of South Waziristan is estimated at around 500,000.

A 22-year-old student who escaped from Ladha told the *Guardian*: "It's a very bad situation. At home, every second house has been destroyed yet the government doesn't want to help us. If they can drop bombs, then they can drop food." Another man from a village near Makeen said his home had been completely destroyed by bombing. His extended family of

40 had crammed into a pick-up and drove throughout the night without lights to avoid being attacked by the military.

A farmer who fled from his village told the Associated Press: “Years ago, the army suddenly started an operation and we all had to leave our area in the clothes we were wearing. When we returned our homes were either bombed, bulldozed or torched. Our animals were missing. Now imagine, if they come with more might, what they will do with our area.”

The military claims that it has killed at least 250 Taliban and lost 31 troops. It also claims that large numbers of militants are deserting their positions, shaving their beards and seeking to pass themselves off as displaced persons. None of these assertions can be verified as all media has been banned from the war zone by the Pakistani government and the Taliban. There is no credible estimate of civilian casualties.

The South Waziristan offensive is a mercenary operation on Washington’s orders. The Pakistani government has agreed to slaughter its own citizens in order to gain US financial grants and ongoing military aid. The hope in the White House and the Pentagon is that crushing the Islamist movement in Pakistan will undermine the ability of the Afghan Taliban to sustain its eight-year insurgency against the US-led occupation.

The close US oversight of the operation has been underscored by a succession of visits by top Obama administration officials and high-ranking US military commanders to Islamabad. The latest is by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Obama’s special envoy to Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, who arrive today for three days of talks with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani and armed forces chief General Parvez Kayani.

Holbrooke stated last Friday that one of the visit’s purposes was to ensure that the Pakistani leadership were serious about “destroying” the Taliban, rather than simply “dispersing” the militants. An unnamed US military official complained to the *New York Times* that Pakistan did not seem willing to “finish the task” by permanently occupying South Waziristan.

The fear in US strategic circles is that thousands of Taliban fighters will go to ground or simply retake control of the agency once the Pakistani military pulls out. Many could escape by crossing into Afghanistan via North Waziristan, which is not being subjected to military attack. The northern agency is believed to be the stronghold of the Afghan insurgent Haqqani network—a movement led by former commanders of the CIA-financed and equipped *mujahhadin* who fought the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

Significant sections of the Pakistani ruling elite, particularly

within the military, are growing increasingly hostile to the constant US pressure for total war against the Islamists. In order to meet Washington’s demands, virtually the entire military resources of the Pakistani state would have to be dedicated to combating the militants at the expense of other goals, including curbing Indian influence in the region.

Sameer Lalwani, an analyst for the New America Foundation, wrote in September that Pakistan would need to deploy as many as 370,000 to 430,000 troops to permanently suppress Taliban activity in the tribal agencies and areas of North West Frontier Province (NWFP). He estimated it would take two to five years to assemble the necessary force and would require the redeployment of 150,000 combat troops currently stationed on the Indian border, as well as massive and ongoing US logistical and financial assistance.

Lalwani’s report noted that “as the US role expands and becomes more visible, Pakistan likely would face a stiff public backlash, a steep decline in the morale of its regular and irregular forces, and a more cohesive insurgency”. He also observed that any attempt to lessen the social inequality and oppression that help fuel the Islamist rebellion would require reforms that “undermine the power of the country’s existing elites and land-owning classes, which dominate the political scene”.

Ashfaq Khan, a leading academic in Islamabad, told the *New York Times*: “There is a general perception in the educated class that Pakistan is paying a very heavy price for fighting alongside the United States.” Dependent on American financial, political and military aid, the government has little choice but to bow to US demands to intensify the war.

Having created disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington is responsible for the deepening quagmire now unfolding in Pakistan.



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