

Wave of bombings hits Pakistan's north west

James Cogan
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Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Pakistani Taliban, is carrying out an intense campaign of almost daily suicide bombings and assassinations in retaliation for the military offensive against its strongholds in the tribal agency of South Waziristan.

Under pressure from the US, President Ali Asif Zardari ordered 30,000 troops into the agency on October 17 to prevent Afghan insurgents using it as a safe haven for their guerilla war against American and NATO forces. As a result, Pakistani Islamists now consider themselves at war with the government and its security forces. Army installations, police stations and military intelligence facilities are being targeted, primarily in the country's north-western region near the tribal areas.

Yesterday, a suicide bomber detonated a pick-up truck full of explosives outside the entrance of a police station in Badhabar, a suburb of Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. At least four people were killed and more than 26 seriously wounded. Indicative of the nation-wide character of the Taliban insurgency, police in the city of Lahore, far from the fighting in Waziristan, captured a truck en route to Peshawar filled with 38 boxes of high explosives.

In the early hours of Sunday, a Taliban death squad assassinated a pro-government tribal head in the agency of Bajaur. A group of almost 50 militants also attempted to kill the mayor of a Peshawar suburb, but were fought off by his security guards.

On Saturday, a bomber detonated an explosive-laden car when he was stopped at a police checkpoint on the outskirts of Peshawar. At least 12 people were killed, including a three-year-old child, and 34 wounded. The intended target is not known.

On Friday, a suicide bomber drove a truck filled with explosives and fertilizer into the entrance of the Peshawar offices of Pakistan's main spy agency, the Inter Services

Intelligence (ISI). The three-storey building was virtually destroyed, leaving 10 people dead and over 60 wounded. Another bomber attacked a police station in the town of Bannu, south west of Peshawar, killing three. Last Wednesday, a bomb exploded in a fruit market in the town of Charsadda, killing 32 people and injuring dozens.

As well as the attack on the police facilities and ISI building, two other bombings took place in Peshawar last week. Reports on Sunday described a city paralysed by fear. The *News International* reported: "Peshawar braved four suicide attacks during the last six days and the prevailing situation has prompted its worried residents to avoid leaving homes unless necessary. They are not only avoiding visiting bazaars and crowded places, but even reluctant to send their children to schools on Fridays, as four recent blasts, on October 9, 16 and 23 and November 13 were carried out on Fridays."

Over 400 people have been killed in the past seven weeks, including as many as 120 who died as a result of a massive explosion that tore through a busy market in Peshawar on October 28. The highest profile attack took place on October 11, on the eve of the Waziristan offensive, when Taliban fighters stormed the army's main national headquarters in the garrison city of Rawalpindi.

A TTP spokesman, Azam Tariq, released a video on Sunday in which he denied that the Islamists had any involvement in attacks on civilian targets. He accused "the dirty Pakistani intelligence agencies" of carrying out such bombings in order to sow "mistrust and hatred among people against the Taliban".

Other Taliban sources told the *News International* last week that many of its militants had been recruited due to their grievances over the July 2007 nine-day siege and military assault on the Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque. At the time, the complex was the centre of Islamist organisation and agitation in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad. Between 100 and 300 Islamic students were killed, including radical cleric

Abdul Rashid Ghazi, when troops stormed the building.

An even greater pool of potential recruits is being created by the offensive in South Waziristan, and earlier offensives in the Bajaur and Mohmand agencies and the Swat Valley district of North West Frontier Province. These military operations killed thousands of people and forced millions from their homes, leaving a legacy of bitterness and hatred.

In a month of fighting in South Waziristan, the Pakistani army claims to have killed over 500 TTP fighters at the cost of some 60 of its own troops. Over 325,000 civilians, members of the ethnic Pashtun tribes that inhabit the area, have been forced to flee as a result of indiscriminate military bombings. Under conditions of strict censorship, the scant information available suggests that dozens of villages and most major towns in South Waziristan have been severely damaged.

According to the most recent Pakistani military press releases, its forces have advanced deep into the agency and effectively surrounded Makeen, which was the Taliban's main centre. Much of the town has been destroyed by artillery and air bombardments. Operations in the agency's remote mountainous terrain will grind to a halt over the coming weeks due to the beginning of heavy winter snowfalls.

Despite heavy clashes, it is now believed that most of the estimated 10,000 to 15,000 Islamist militants fled to North Waziristan or other areas of Pakistan before the offensive began. The military conducted several search-and-destroy missions last week against Taliban hide-outs in the neighbouring tribal agency of Orakzai, allegedly killing up to 17 fighters. In the Swat Valley, 34 Taliban were killed last week in the ongoing clashes in the district.

Obama's national security advisor, former General James Jones, was dispatched to Islamabad last Friday. According to *New York Times* sources, the purpose of the visit was to deliver a letter to Zardari from Obama, which stated he "expected" the Pakistani president to mobilise the country's "political and national security institutions in a united campaign against extremists". Jones reportedly demanded that Pakistani troops deploy into North Waziristan to hunt down the TTP militants who had fled there.

Jones also called for attacks in North Waziristan on the Afghan Haqqani network, one of main wings of anti-occupation insurgency in Afghanistan, and for operations against the Afghan Taliban leadership group that is allegedly

directing operations from Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Balochistan province.

Such demands will only fuel the pervasive anti-US sentiment inside Pakistan. In the eyes of millions of Pakistanis, Zardari's government is functioning as even more of a US puppet than the dictatorship of former president Pervez Musharraf. In exchange for economic aid, which mainly benefits the country's corrupt ruling elite, the country has been plunged into a destabilising and costly civil war, in which Pakistani troops are effectively being used as mercenaries to fight for American strategic interests.

Opposition to Zardari's subservience to Washington is intersecting with a general rise in discontent over the country's deteriorating economic conditions. Rampant inflation and the operations of agricultural cartels have caused sharp rises in food prices. As much as half the population of 170 million is estimated to be unable to afford sufficient food. Electricity and gas costs have also risen for many people.

The Obama administration's reckless escalation of the war in Afghanistan and pressure on Islamabad to crack down on Islamic militants has deepened the country's political crisis. Zardari's government could be the next victim.

Sections of the military hierarchy, already riled by Zardari's withdrawal of troops from the border with rival India to fight in the tribal agencies, are said to be bitter over the terms of the US aid package. Islamabad is obliged to provide regular reports to the US secretary of state to ensure the military meets a series of conditions and benchmarks, including the exclusion of Islamists from promotions. An offensive into North Waziristan, in the midst of winter, requiring further redeployments from the Indian border, would stretch the army to breaking point.

The *Washington Post* reported yesterday that "some critics" of Zardari "are urging him to step down, and others predict he will be forced from office within months".



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