

Civil war spreads across north west Pakistan

James Cogan
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The Pakistani military offensive in South Waziristan against Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP)—the Pakistani Taliban—has escalated into a civil war throughout the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Islamists and tribal militants now consider themselves in a fight to the death with the pro-US government of President Ali Asif al-Zardari, which has bowed to Washington's demands to deploy overwhelming force to stop the predominantly ethnic Pashtun regions being used to support the Taliban resistance over the border in Afghanistan.

On Sunday, the military reported that it had finally taken the area around the town of Shahu Khel in the NWFP district of Hangu, after nearly a month of fighting. In clashes on the weekend, as many as 13 Islamists and one soldier were killed. (Click here if you wish to open a new window showing the area referred to in this article)

Shahu Khel is close to the tribal agency of Orakzai, where a number of TTP militants from South Waziristan are believed to have concentrated after the military launched the offensive. Troops have sealed off all the roads into Orakzai and are converging on villages that are held by the TTP. To justify civilian casualties, the military told the media that the Islamists had stopped people fleeing the area so it could use them as “human shields”. In the first stage of the operation, troops captured an FM radio station on Sunday that was being used to agitate for resistance to the government. A radio tower, the station building itself and an alleged militant camp were destroyed.

The military has also launched helicopter gunship assaults over the past several days against alleged Taliban “hideouts” in Kurram agency, which is to the west of Orakzai and borders Afghanistan. The *Dawn* news agency reported on Sunday that “residents of central Kurram have started migrating to safer areas”.

In Bajaur, the northern-most FATA agency, the military carried out air bombardments of suspected Taliban hideouts

on Sunday and claimed to have killed five militants. According to *Dawn* sources, one of the attacks killed a Taliban leader named Fam Jan, and also slaughtered his wife and two sons. Another attack, ostensibly seeking to assassinate a militant named Maulvi Muneer, instead killed two of his relatives.

Following the air strikes, as many as 40 men made a failed attempt to over-run an army outpost close to the Bajaur-Afghan border on Sunday. Government troops fought them off, reportedly killing 11.

Pakistani troops were sent into an offensive against the Taliban in Bajaur and the neighbouring agency of Mohmand in August 2008. Four months of indiscriminate bombardment forced an estimated 500,000 people to flee their homes. Hundreds of homes, farms, schools and other buildings were destroyed or damaged in major towns such as Loyesam and Khar as well as numerous villages. The military claimed to have killed more than 1,500 militant fighters last year. Unknown numbers of civilians were killed or wounded.

An offensive in the more densely populated NWFP district of Swat Valley was even more devastating, displacing over 1.9 million people and leaving thousands dead.

Less than a year later, the Taliban is once again operating in Swat, Bajaur and Mohmand, underscoring that the earlier operations served only to generate bitterness and hatred and enlarge the pool of recruits for a burgeoning Islamist rebellion against the government.

The Waziristan offensive is being conducted with scant regard for its impact on civilians. A UN mission estimates that over 300,000 people from South Waziristan have been forced from their homes and are living as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in NWFP towns such as Tank and Dera Ismail Khan. The total population of the South Waziristan agency is less than 600,000.

A UN report on November 17 stated: “They [the IDPs] reported large-scale destruction and damage in the conflict-affected areas of South Waziristan (destruction/severe damage to houses, livestock and social infrastructure).” These claims have been substantiated by journalists allowed to conduct brief visits to some of the towns captured from the TTP during the offensive.

Agence France Presse (AFP) correspondent Masroor Gilani wrote on November 19 that in the main market of the town of Sararogha, “mangled shutters lie in the rubble scattered everywhere as if a typhoon had ripped through the dusty valley ringed by mountains.” The town of Ladha “is now reduced to a shell of damaged buildings, piles of rubble and ruined paramilitary fort. There is not a civilian in sight.”

The fighting for Ladha was reportedly the most intense so far in the offensive. Over 250 militants were allegedly killed defending it. In total, the government claims that the military has killed over 550 TTP fighters, at the cost of 70 troops. The figures cannot be independently verified.

The military is now concentrating its forces in South Waziristan on Makeen, the last major town still held by the TTP. After months of air strikes and ground artillery bombardments, most of it is likely already in ruins.

A TTP spokesman stated last week that the bulk of its forces were not attempting to hold towns such as Makeen and Ladha, but had withdrawn into the mountains “under a strategy that will trap the Pakistan Army in the area”. The military has rejected such claims, declaring that the Islamists had suffered a “rout”. The reported casualty figures, however, indicate that most of the militants have escaped the offensive in one way or another. The TTP strength in South Waziristan was widely estimated to be at least 10,000.

An ongoing wave of daily suicide bombings and other attacks in Peshawar, the capital of NWFP, suggests that Taliban militants were able to disperse from South Waziristan. Any facility connected with the government and its offensives is being targeted. On Saturday, the compound of an international aid organisation was bombed. On Friday, a roadside bomb killed two police. In the most deadly recent attack, a suicide bomber detonated explosives on the steps of a Peshawar court house last Thursday as police attempted to body search him. The blast killed 19 people and wounded another 51.

Islamists have also conducted attacks in cities outside NWFP, including the capital Islamabad, the military

headquarters in Rawalpindi and Lahore. In a reversal of the general trend over the past eight years, Afghan militants are supporting those fighting the Pakistani government. On Saturday, two trucks entering Pakistan from Afghanistan were captured after a firefight with their occupants and found to contain rifles, rocket launchers and large quantities of ammunition, most likely destined for Taliban cells in one of Pakistan’s major cities.

The Obama administration is demanding that Zardari escalate the civil war in the north west by launching a major offensive into the agency of North Waziristan. Many militants from South Waziristan are thought to have fled there and the Haqqani network, one of the main Afghan insurgent organisations, is believed to have bases in the mountainous terrain along the border.

The CIA and US military are continuing their own attacks inside Pakistan, using unmanned Predator drones to attempt to assassinate Taliban and Haqqani leaders and militants. Two Predator strikes were launched last week in North Waziristan. Last Thursday morning, missiles destroyed a house and reportedly killed three men in a remote village near the border with South Waziristan. On Friday, eight militants allegedly died in an attack on a housing compound near the village of Mir Ali.

The escalating violence, taking place on the dictates of Washington, can only have the most explosive political consequences. Barely 14 months after taking over the presidency, Zardari has plunged the country into a worsening civil war that has devastated the north west and is costing as much as \$10 billion a year. The war is creating deep-going discontent within the military and more broadly among the wider population, compounding the political crisis surrounding the government.



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