

AfPak war claimed over 12,500 lives in Pakistan during 2009

James Cogan
14 January 2010

The Pak Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) report published on January 10 makes clear that the carnage from the fighting between the Pakistani military and anti-government Islamist and tribal militants more than matches that taking place in neighbouring US-occupied Afghanistan. In 2009, the low-level civil war in Pakistan cost the lives of at least 12,632 people and wounded another 12,815, as compared to an estimated 6,500 deaths in Afghanistan.

Last year, the military conducted operations across the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (FATA), where predominantly ethnic Pashtun tribes had been allowed to run their own affairs since independence in 1947. Following the launching of the so-called “war on terror” by the US, Washington has compelled Islamabad to repudiate tribal autonomy and use force to suppress Taliban Islamists providing assistance to the anti-US insurgency in Afghanistan. The result was a broad rebellion in the Swat Valley district of North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Islamist cells are now active in all the major cities, launching attacks on government and military targets, as well as conducting indiscriminate terrorist attacks against the civilian population.

Since late 2008 and particularly since the Obama administration took office in January 2009, the violence has escalated. Offensives were concluded early last year in the Swat Valley and the tribal agencies of Bajaur and Mohmand, leaving more than two million people displaced from their homes. In October, as many as 50,000 troops and paramilitary personnel were flung into an assault against Taliban strongholds in South Waziristan. Dozens of towns and villages were reduced to rubble by army bombardments and more than 400,000 civilians fled the agency. The Taliban has launched retaliatory attacks across the country.

The PIPS report provides a statistical estimate of the consequences. The military conducted 596 “operational attacks” against militants during 2009. At least 6,329 people

were killed and 3,181 injured. There were also 209 incidents in which militants attacked the security forces, in which at least 1,163 people died and 780 were wounded. Another 1,209 people were killed and 787 wounded in fighting between Islamist rebels and pro-government tribal militias. There were also 130 incidents that PIPS classified as “political violence”, or assassinations, claiming a further 209 lives and injuring 370.

The report provides no breakdown of the casualties into militants, soldiers and civilians. Given that Pakistan’s defence minister Ahmad Mukhtar claimed last week that only 2,500 Taliban fighters were killed in both Swat Valley and South Waziristan, the majority of the deaths and injuries caused by military operations last year were most likely civilians.

Taliban and other anti-government organisations carried out a total of 2,586 “terrorist attacks”, according to PIPS. At least 3,021 people were killed and more than 7,334 wounded. The bulk of the attacks took place in NWFP, the province of Balochistan and the FATA, but some of the highest profile incidents occurred in the major cities of Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Karachi and Lahore.

The PIPS report blamed the remaining 700 deaths and 363 injuries recorded in 2009 on US drone attacks against alleged Taliban targets inside Pakistan. Pakistani government sources have indicated that the number was higher and that the overwhelming majority of those killed by US operations were innocent civilians (see: “US drone missiles slaughtered 700 Pakistani civilians in 2009”).

PIPS also tallied the number of people arrested in mass round-ups of alleged militants during military offensives or following terrorist attacks in the major cities. At least 12,866 people were detained last year, of whom 9,739 were accused of being involved with the Taliban or other Pakistani-based anti-government movements. Just 75 were held on suspicion

of being connected to the Al Qaeda terrorist network. Amnesty International noted in its 2009 report on Pakistan that detainees were commonly held without charges for “long periods of time” and that “law enforcement and security agencies routinely used torture and other ill-treatment, including beating, prolonged standing, hanging by the ankles and rape.”

Like the Iraq Body Count record of deaths in the Iraq war, the PIPS statistics were compiled from media accounts. The result is therefore likely to underestimate the actual number of deaths and injuries. Much of the violence took place in areas where the media had no independent access and was not filing reports. Journalists were not permitted into South Waziristan during the military offensive. When they were able to enter towns and villages after the fighting ended, they reported scenes of utter devastation.

The statistics also cannot provide any insight into the number of lives lost in Pakistan as an indirect outcome of President Obama’s so-called AfPak war. It is not known how many of the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons died because they could not access health care, safe drinking water, adequate shelter or sufficient food. In other mass displacements, the weakest—infants, young children, pregnant women, the sick and the elderly—have suffered the highest fatality rates.

The fighting and deaths in Pakistan will only continue to escalate in 2010. Over the past several days, the Pakistani military has begun a major offensive to dislodge anti-government militants from the agency of Orakzai. Large numbers of Islamist fighters escaped north to Orakzai before the assault against South Waziristan.

The military has moved into a number of villages where the local tribal leadership has sided with the government. All roads in and out of the agency have been blocked by Frontier Corp paramilitary troops, army tanks and armoured vehicles. Tens of thousands of civilians have fled to neighbouring districts of NWFP.

According to *Dawn*, a Pakistani publication, “thousands” of militants are preparing to defend areas of Orakzai against the military. Helicopter gunships and artillery have been pounding alleged Taliban positions for weeks. Last Friday, the Pakistani Army claimed to have destroyed three hide-outs in the northern part of the agency, killing at least six anti-government fighters.

The offensive in Orakzai appears aimed at forcing

militants to flee into the neighbouring agency of North Waziristan, the only part of the FATA that the Pakistani military has not attempted to capture. An offensive into North Waziristan may be next on the agenda.

The Obama administration has threatened to withhold financial and military assistance to Islamabad if it does not order troops into North Waziristan. The agency, which adjoins the volatile Taliban-controlled Afghan provinces of Paktika and Khost, is allegedly the base of operations for the Pashtun warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani. A key figure in the US-backed mujahaddin war against Soviet forces in the 1980s and the Taliban’s military commander against the US invasion, he now leads thousands of the Taliban guerillas resisting the US-led occupation. Pakistani Taliban militants are also believed to have linked up with his forces to escape the military offensives elsewhere in the FATA.

The Haqqani network and its bases along the porous border are viewed by US strategists as one of the greatest obstacles to subjugating Afghanistan and transforming it into a client state. The majority of US drone attacks inside North Waziristan have not targetted “terrorists”, but have attempted to assassinate Haqqani or his son Sirajuddin, who is thought to be the guerilla movement’s field commander. Now, the Pakistani government is under pressure to send tens of thousands of troops into the agency.

Upon returning from a visit to Islamabad last week, US Senators John McCain and Joe Lieberman indicated to the media that they were confident the Pakistani government would bow to US demands. Lieberman told CNN on Sunday: “We met with General Kayani, the chief of the army. The Pakistani army is on the move. It pushed the Taliban out of the Swat area. It pretty much cleared South Waziristan. I think there is a possibility that we’ll see some movement in North Waziristan.”

If an offensive is launched, it would guarantee that the AfPak war costs even more lives in Pakistan during 2010 than were lost last year.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact