

Pakistani air strike kills more than 70 civilians

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In a bid to quell public anger, Pakistan's army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, was forced to issue a public apology last Saturday over the killing of more than 70 civilians in a recent air strike on a village near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The air strike was part of the proxy war being fought by Pakistan on behalf of Washington to suppress Islamist militants fighting against the US-led occupation inside neighbouring Afghanistan.

The attack took place on April 10 at Sravela village in the remote Tirah Valley of the Khyber Agency, which is part of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The dead and injured included women, children and elderly people of the Kukikhel tribe. It was the worst incident involving the Pakistani military since it began operations into the border areas in 2003.

The army initially insisted that the air strike had killed 42 Taliban fighters and claimed that the Tirah valley was a "stronghold" of the Islamist group Lashkar-e-Islam and a "hub" for Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters. Local residents, however, insisted that the bombing had killed civilians and that the village did not support the Taliban.

"All of those killed were civilians, 100 percent innocent," Ikramullah Jan Kukikhel, a local tribal leader, told the media. "The Kukikhel are with the government. We have never joined the Taliban or any other fundamentalist group. We are normal people who just want peace for the country."

According to the *New York Times*, the local Khyber administration expressed condolences and paid compensation to the families of the victims. Those being treated at the Hayatabad Medical Complex in Peshawar said that a plane had dropped a bomb on a house, then as villagers scrambled to retrieve the dead and wounded, a

plane dropped another bomb. "It was the second bomb that caused the most devastation," Kashmalu Khan Afridi said. He lost 11 relatives in the attack.

The Kyber Agency has a population of more than half a million. Like other FATA areas, it has largely been neglected by successive Pakistani governments. It lacks basic physical and social infrastructure, including roads, health care and education. The literacy rate is just 6.7 percent among males and less than 1 percent for females.

General Kayani made his apology for the airstrike—the first of its kind—amid rising criticism from tribal leaders and sections of the Pakistani media who warned that the military would further lose support among tribespeople in the FATA region. The army chief said the "unfortunate incident" had "resulted in loss of precious and innocent civilian lives" and promised "measures to avoid a reoccurrence of such incidents in future".

More civilian deaths are inevitable, however, as the Pakistani military continues its offensives that have left a swathe of destruction in their wake. Under pressure from the Obama administration, the army launched a major operation last April into the Swat Valley that displaced an estimated two million people.

Naseem Akhtar, a senior civilian administrator in the Swat region, told Agence France Presse this week that "reconstruction" was "a Herculean task". According to the UN, 175 of the 1,576 schools in the valley were destroyed during the offensive and another 226 damaged. Akhtar warned of a new "class war" if the huge disparity between wealthy landowners and poor farmers—which the Taliban had exploited—was not addressed.

Operations in the Swat Valley were followed in October

by an offensive in the FATA agency of South Waziristan that destroyed scores of villages and towns and left at least 400,000 people homeless. Last month General Kayani claimed that the military had achieved all its major objectives in the agency, but residents are reluctant to return. The army holds the main towns, yet insurgents still control large mountainous areas and continue to harass the military.

According to a Pak Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) report, 6,329 people were killed and 3,181 injured during the military's "operational attacks" in 2009. The report also gave overall figures, including retaliatory suicide bombings by Islamist militants and cross-border attacks by US and NATO forces, as 12,632 dead and 12,815 injured—up from 907 dead and 1,543 injured in 2006. Undoubtedly, a majority of casualties were civilians.

The UN warned last week that aid groups were running out of funds to assist an estimated 1.3 million people still displaced by the military's operations. A further 200,000 people were driven out of their homes after the Pakistani army launched an offensive into the Orakzai agency last month.

The Pakistani government and military are again under pressure from Washington to launch a new operation into North Waziristan in the northern spring and summer. To date the army has resisted US demands, pointing out that it is already overstretched in holding onto territory occupied in last year's offensives. With almost a third of its half million strong-army engaged in fighting Islamist insurgents, it does not want to pull more troops from the border with its regional rival India.

However, the Obama administration has boosted US troop numbers in Afghanistan and the US military is preparing a major offensive to establish firm control of the southern Afghan city of Kandahar. As these US operations begin, the Pakistani military will come under renewed pressure to extend its control in the FATA areas.

President Asif Ali Zardari's government is heavily dependent on US political, financial and military support. Facing a severe balance of payments crisis last year, it was compelled to take out a \$US11.3 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund. The US also agreed to provide \$7.5 billion in economic assistance over the next five years to Pakistan but the money is conditional on its

support for the so-called Afpak war.

Last month, Islamabad and Washington held a "strategic dialogue" to put Pakistan's relationship with US "on a new footing". In a statement issued after the talks, the two countries declared they would "redouble their efforts to deal effectively with terrorism" and would work together for "peace and stability in Afghanistan." Although Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi officially led the Pakistani delegation, General Kayani played a major role in the talks.

Kayani's apology last Saturday is just one symptom of the deep political and social divisions that Pakistan's support for the US "war on terrorism" has opened up. Zardari and his government are regarded by broad layers of people as little more than US puppets. That anger is being fuelled by Pakistani military's operations, as well as by US attacks using unmanned drones inside the FATA areas.

According to the PIPS report, 78 "border clashes" involving US and NATO forces, which included drone bombings, took place in 2009, killing 700 people and injuring another 363. The figures are likely to underestimate the actual casualties, many of whom were civilians, as PIPS is clearly partisan in its support for the "war on terrorism". Just days after the airstrike in the Tirah Valley, a US drone attack took place in North Waziristan that allegedly killed "four militants".



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