

Pakistani military launches offensive into Kurram agency

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The Pakistani military launched a major offensive this week against Islamist and tribal militants in the Kurram agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of north-west Pakistan. There is no doubt that the operation has been ordered to improve relations with the Obama administration after the tensions that developed in the wake of the May 1 assassination of Osama bin Laden.

The flagrant violation of Pakistani sovereignty involved in bin Laden's killing, followed by the open accusations in Washington that the Pakistani intelligence services had been sheltering the Al Qaeda leader, provoked outrage within Pakistani ruling circles. Sections of the military hierarchy responded to calls in the US for an end to financial and military aid to Pakistan with their own calls for a break in relations.

As mutual recriminations grew, the Pakistani military ordered as many as 100 US military advisors to leave the country and reportedly demanded the closure of the American Predator drone base at the Shamsi airfield, in the province of Baluchistan.

Predators, believed to be operating from Shamsi, carry out regular missile attacks in the FATA against alleged militant targets, killing and wounding hundreds of civilians and terrorising the population. President Asif Ali Zardari's government maintains the charade that it opposes the Predator operations and regularly condemns them as violations of Pakistan's sovereignty. Cables released by WikiLeaks, however, showed that behind-the-scenes the Zardari administration actively collaborates with the attacks and nominates targets for assassination.

Since Bin Laden's execution, weeks of talks have taken place between US diplomats and military officials and the heads of the Pakistani government and armed forces over

the terms of the two country's relations. They have centred on the Obama administration's demand that Pakistan prove its credentials as a reliable satrap for US imperialism by launching a renewed offensive against the Afghan insurgency's strongholds in the FATA.

The assault on Kurram agency is the outcome. Information is scant due to a ban on international media, observers and aid agencies entering the region, but official Pakistani sources claim that thousands of troops are involved.

On Monday, helicopters dropped troops around a number of towns in the central region of the Kurram. Other units, supported by tanks and heavy artillery, pushed north along the major road linking the major Pakistani city of Peshawar with Parachinar, Kurram's administrative centre in the north-west of the agency. The road has been closed for years due to insurgent attacks. Yesterday, the Pakistani military claimed its forces had advanced 18 kilometres along the road, killing some 50 militants and securing several key towns.

Kurram, which juts into Afghanistan and until 1876 was part of that country, is a mountainous, relatively inaccessible but strategic region. It was used throughout the 1980s as one of main staging bases for the US-backed Islamist insurgents opposing the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The Tora Bora cave complex, which was transformed into an underground transport link and network of bunkers and supply depots, is easily accessible from Kurram. The agency borders the Afghan provinces of Khost, Paktia and Nangarhar, and is a short distance from the Afghan city of Jalalabad and the capital Kabul. To the south, Kurram borders the FATA agency of North Waziristan.

The mountainous central area of Kurram is considered one of the last remaining bastions of Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP), or the Pakistani Taliban, as well as the Afghan Haqqani network, a tribal Pashtun insurgent movement named after its titular leader Jalaluddin Haqqani.

During the 1980s, Haqqani was a favourite of the CIA and was provided large amounts of cash and weapons. He integrated significant numbers of Arab Islamists into his fighting units and worked closely with Bin Laden to develop the Tora Bora caves. Under the Taliban, Haqqani served as a minister and on the eve of the 2001 US invasion was named the commander of its military forces.

Following the fall of the Taliban government, Haqqani called for ongoing resistance and his loyalists have fought the occupation forces since then. In the FATA, Haqqani's forces coordinate closely with the TTP's armed opposition to the Pakistani government. A recent International Crisis Group report commented that the movement receives an "endless supply of predominantly Pashtun recruits" from Pakistan's tribal region.

The US military has made numerous attempts to assassinate the Haqqani leadership using Predator drones. The network, now effectively led by Haqqani's sons, is considered by American analysts to be a major obstacle to arranging some form of Afghan "peace" settlement with the Taliban. Haqqani's forces are believed to be unlikely to agree to end resistance as long as any foreign troops remain in Afghanistan. Last month, it was Haqqani loyalists who carried out the high-profile suicide attack on the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul while peace talks were taking place.

Earlier Pakistani military offensives in the tribal agencies of Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai and South Waziristan have forced both TTP and Haqqani militants to concentrate in Kurram and North Waziristan.

The latest operation appears aimed in part at driving Haqqani and his fighters into North Waziristan or over the border into Afghanistan. In signs that the Pakistani offensive is being closely coordinated with the Pentagon, the US military has recently intensified its activity in Khost and Paktia. Over the past week, American troops have been killed in battles in both provinces. An air strike on July 6 against alleged insurgent households in Khost slaughtered eight children and three women.

As in previous Pakistani military operations in FATA areas, the main victims of the Kurram offensive will be the civilian population. As many as 20,000 of Kurram's 480,000 people have already fled their homes. Tent cities are being erected in former Afghan refugee camps in the southern area of the agency to house the expected tens of thousands more internally displaced persons.

According to Pakistani media speculation, the Kurram operations will be followed by an assault in North Waziristan before the onset of winter, when the region becomes almost inaccessible for heavy vehicles. The Obama administration and the US military have repeatedly demanded that the Pakistani government occupy North Waziristan with tens of thousands of troops and crush insurgent organisations—regardless of how many Pakistani troops and civilians die as a result.

On July 6, Pakistani troops launched an attack into North Waziristan's capital Miranshah, reportedly in response to Taliban bombardments of army checkpoints that ring the town. In a hint of the collective punishment that the Pakistani military will mete out to tribal communities for allegedly supporting the TTP insurgency, a military official told Agence France Presse that troops had "dynamited" a hospital that had treated Taliban wounded.



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