

Pakistan: 250,000 displaced by army operation in Khyber Agency

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Fierce clashes between Pakistani troops and Islamist militants in the country's northwest tribal areas have forced more than 250,000 people, most of them women and children, to flee their homes since January, according to Save the Children.

Much of the fighting is taking place in Khyber Agency, where the army has been struggling since 2009 to defeat the local warlord Mangal Bagh and his supporters. Pakistani troops have used heavy and indiscriminate shelling in their attempt to crush Bagh's militia, killing an untold number of civilians, reports the local media.

Mangal Bagh is a former bus conductor. The militia group he founded, Lashkar-i-Islam (Army of Islam), controls parts of Khyber's Bara and Tirah sub-districts and is currently engaged in a deadly turf war with the Pakistani Taliban. The group is known mainly for kidnapping and extortion, but it has also carried out attacks against Pakistan's security forces. Recently, the military has stepped up its fight against Bagh's militia, claiming that the group's turf war with the Taliban is linked to increased bomb and rocket attacks in the major northwestern city of Peshawar.

The army is conducting its operation against Bagh with callous disregard for the lives of ordinary people. "The use of tactics such as shelling by security forces means that an unknown number of civilians continue to die while everyone who is in a position to flee does so," according to a report in the *Dawn*. While many of those fleeing find refuge with relatives and friends in other parts of the country, tens of thousands have been forced to take shelter at refugee camps such as Jalozai, Pakistan's largest refugee camp. Since 2007, Jalozai has provided refuge to scores of families fleeing the brutal counterinsurgency war in the tribal areas. Today, most of the nearly 110,000 refugees living at the camp

are recent arrivals from Khyber Agency. While the camp is already crowded and low on supplies, thousands of refugees continue to arrive each day. "Five thousand people are expected to register today, three days back it was 2,900," UNHCR field officer Changaiz Mataul Hussain told AFP last Saturday.

Refugees at the camp have described the devastating impact of the military operation in Khyber. "They speak of their horror at gun battles, air strikes and mortar rounds destroying houses, but few go into details, fearful of spies," according to the *Express Tribune*. Banmaroo, a woman from Khyber, wept as she recalled how her husband was killed during the fighting. "He was just a laborer. Firing started. I don't know who killed him, but I was handed his body in the afternoon. It was in such a rough condition, just pieces," she said. "Mangal Bagh targets us on the ground and government jets target us from the air," said another woman.

Pakistan's military first began conducting counter-insurgency operations in the country's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in 2004, under orders from Washington and against the will of the Pakistani people. Following the 9/11 attacks, the Musharraf dictatorship had withdrawn its support for the Afghan Taliban and provided logistical support for the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan, but Washington demanded Pakistan destroy Taliban "safe-havens" in the adjacent Pashtun-speaking FATA.

After coming to power in 2008, the current Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led civilian government drastically escalated the counterinsurgency war, while allowing the US to rain bombs on Pakistani towns and villages with its Predator drones.

The number of internal refugees created by the war has been estimated at more than 5 million, with at least

one million still unable to return home. The displacement of millions of ordinary people has contributed greatly to the tremendous popular opposition to the war, as have the brutal tactics used by the Pakistani army such as torture and extrajudicial killings. Refugees around the country have taken part in the frequent mass protests against the neo-colonial AfPak war.

The destabilizing impact of the war and the US's bullying tactics led to increased tension between Washington and Islamabad over the 16 months, with US-Pakistan relations reaching their low-point following a NATO airstrike last November on two Pakistani military posts that killed two dozen Pakistani troops. The killing of the troops sparked widespread protests, leading Pakistan to implement retaliatory measures against the US, including closing two supply routes to the US-NATO forces occupying Afghanistan. Within weeks, however, Islamabad made clear its desire to mend relations with Washington and resume full and open cooperation in the AfPak war.

Last month, Pakistan's Parliament began a phony "review" of the country's terms of engagement with the US. While one of the main topics of discussion during the review has been whether or not Pakistan should reopen the supply routes to Afghanistan, Islamabad already made it clear in January that it is willing to reopen the border crossings in exchange for increased transit fees and is simply waiting for Parliament to rubber stamp the decision. The review was expected to be completed by the beginning of April, but the government's effort to get back to business as usual had been complicated by the refusal of opposition parties to take part in the proceedings. The Pakistan Muslim League (N) and the Islamic fundamentalist Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) boycotted the review, considered a sham by ordinary Pakistanis, in order to posture as the true defenders of Pakistani sovereignty in the run-up to elections which must be held some time during the next year. Earlier this week, however, both PML (N) leader Nawaz Sharif and JUI (F) leader Fazl ur-Rahman said they would end their boycotts, making it more likely that the review will be completed soon.

Whatever frictions may exist between the two countries, the Pakistani elite remains economically and geopolitically dependent on Washington, and has no

intention of breaking relations with its imperialist sponsor. That being said, none of the bourgeois parties wants to be seen as responsible for resuming cooperation with the US.

Statements by US officials, including President Obama, indicate that Washington does not expect any substantial changes in Islamabad's policy towards the US. President Obama expressed confidence in Pakistan's policy review late last month during a meeting with Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani while effectively re-asserting the US's right to violate Pakistan's sovereignty. "My expectation," said Obama, "is...that we can achieve the kind of balanced approach that respects Pakistan's sovereignty but also that respects our concerns, with respect to our national security and our need to battle terrorists who have targeted us in the past." The meeting between Obama and Gilani, held on the sidelines of a nuclear summit in Seoul, was the most high-profile meeting between the two countries since the NATO airstrike in November. Just days after the meeting, a US drone attack killed four people in North Waziristan.

In another sign of improving relations, Pakistan is likely to attend a key NATO summit on Afghanistan being held in Chicago in May, according to a Pakistan Foreign Office official who spoke to the *Express Tribune* on Wednesday. Pakistan boycotted the last major conference on Afghanistan, held in the German city of Bonn late last year, in protest over the deadly US air strike on Pakistani troops.



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