Pakistani air raids escalate in North Waziristan

Sampath Perera
28 February 2014

The Pakistan military has been conducting deadly night-time air raids since last week in the North Waziristan agency and nearby tribal regions that border Afghanistan. Up to 100 people have reportedly been killed, triggering a mass exodus of people fearing a full-scale military assault.

The offensive is officially targeting Islamic fundamentalist groups, including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), in order to gain full Pakistani military control over the tribal regions. This has long been demanded by the US, in order to protect its occupation of Afghanistan and maintain its grip over that country long after its scheduled withdrawal of troops at the end of this year.

North Waziristan is a stronghold of the TTP, a collection of Islamist groups allied with the Taliban of Afghanistan. The US has previously accused Pakistan of allowing cross-border attacks from the tribal region and permitting safe havens for fighters operating in Afghanistan. Washington especially wants to eliminate the Haqqani Network, whose stronghold is North Waziristan.

Fighter jets and helicopter gunships have pounded several areas of the tribal region four times since February 20. Al Jazeera reported Tuesday that between 60 and 100 people have been killed in these attacks. Military officials claimed that all were local or foreign "militants" allied with the TTP, but the military has a record of labelling any casualty as a "militant." Last month, it killed scores of civilians, including women and children in similar attacks.

The *Nation* reported that around 40,000 people have already fled North Waziristan, leaving behind homes, shops and other belongings, to escape an assault that increasingly appears imminent. A resident of Bannu, a town on a major road in the tribal regions, told Reuters: "Every day, heavy arms and ammunition are being shifted to Waziristan and then warplanes bomb villages." A military offensive would involve brutal and collective punishment for the population, as demonstrated by previous army expeditions in South Waziristan and the Swat valley.

The air raids are an indication that negotiations announced by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif with the TTP are unlikely to proceed. On February 17, the government pulled out of the talks, which started on February 6, because a TTP-allied militant faction announced that it had killed 23 captured soldiers.

According to sources cited by the *Nation*, Sharif's cabinet decided on Tuesday to continue the air attacks in the tribal regions. It also demanded that the TTP declare an "unconditional ceasefire" in order to resume negotiations.

TTP spokesman Shahidullah Shahid immediately rejected this demand. "It is the government which has waged a war against us and it is for the government to end it now," he told the *Dawn*. He dismissed the so-called scaling down of US drone attacks, saying: "Now we are being hunted through ground drones."

Shahid also accused the country's intelligence agencies of targeted assassinations, pointing to the killing of TTP leader Asmatullah Shaheen Bhittani, who was said to favour negotiations with the government. Bhittani was appointed interim TTP leader after Hakimullah Mehsud was killed in a US drone attack.

The Pakistani military publicly supported the "peace talks" but media reports indicated that it pushed the Sharif government to approve an offensive. Sharif's relations with the powerful military remain tense—his previous term in office ended in the 1999 military coup.

In any case, despite its claims to seek a negotiated

© World Socialist Web Site

settlement, Sharif's government continues to declare that it fully backs the US "war on terrorism"—the fraudulent banner under which Washington has pursued its drive, via its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, to secure hegemony over the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia.

The Obama administration has insisted that Pakistan turn against the militants and publicly distanced itself from Sharif's "peace talks" initiative, saying it was an "internal matter" for Pakistan.

A Reuters report on Wednesday cited an unnamed senior Pakistani government official foreshadowing preparations for a large-scale offensive. "If the negotiations ... do not follow the trajectory that has been planned ... there will be operations not only in North Waziristan but wherever necessary," he said. The official also revealed plans to target the Haqqani Network in coordinated attacks with the US-led NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Further confirmation of an imminent offensive in North Waziristan came in a *Washington Post* report on Wednesday. A senior Pakistani official said 150,000 troops were already in the tribal region "to begin a full-fledged clearing operation" and that the plans had been shared with the Pentagon.

The *Post* noted that CIA Director John Brennan secretly travelled to Islamabad to meet Pakistan army chief General Raheel Sharif and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) head Lieutenant General Zaheerul Islam last Friday. Insiders who broke the news to media claimed the visit was "routine."

Increasing geo-political tensions in the region suggest, however, it was far from "routine." A few days earlier, General Lloyd J. Austin, head of the US Central Command, met with General Sharif in Rawalpindi military headquarters. A Pakistani delegation headed by Defence Secretary Asif Yasin Malik has also been in Washington since Monday.

These developments accompany increasing US pressure on Afghan President Hamid Karzai to sign a B ilater al Security A greement demanded by Washington to maintain a long-term m ilitary presence in Afghanistan (see: "Obama threatens total US withdrawal from Afghanistan").

Likewise, the Obama administration regards Pakistan as pivotal to prop up its occupation of Afghanistan and pursue its wider interests across the region. US intervention in Pakistan, including relentless drone killings, has already caused the country to slide into sectarian violence and civil war. The launching of another offensive by the Sharif government and the Pakistani ruling elite, as demanded by Washington, will escalate the bloodshed and further enmesh the country in the aggressive geostrategic manoeuvres of US imperialism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site