

Pakistan military and US drones pound North Waziristan

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Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal agency is the site of a long-prepared Pakistani military offensive, supplemented by US drone attacks, that is targeting the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and allied Islamic fundamentalist militias.

Launched last Sunday and codenamed Zarb-e-Azb (after a sword wielded by the prophet Muhammad), the offensive is the largest operation mounted by Pakistan's military in years. Pakistani authorities claimed Friday to have killed 232 "terrorists" in the first six days of an operation whose first phase is expected to last six weeks.

To date the offensive has consisted primarily of an aerial assault involving F-16 fighter jets, helicopter gunships and artillery barrages. But an estimated 30,000 troops are poised to launch a ground offensive in North Waziristan, one of the seven traditionally semi-autonomous tribal agencies in northwestern Pakistan that comprise the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

"First ground troops will enter major towns," an unnamed senior security official told Agence France-Presse (AFP) Thursday. "We will then go to the villages and to the mountains."

Already the offensive has triggered a humanitarian crisis, with up to a half of North Waziristan's 650,000 residents fleeing their homes.

With the launching of Zarb-e-Azb, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-led coalition government have decisively repudiated their attempts to engage the TTP in peace talks.

From the outset, the "peace" policy of Sharif's year-old government was opposed by much of the political and national security establishment. The military, which in recent months has been involved in a very public power tussle with the government over control of Pakistan's internal security and foreign policies, claimed to support the government's peace initiative. Nevertheless, it repeatedly violated truces, citing the need to respond in kind to attacks attributed to the TTP, which itself is a loose coalition of tribally based groups.

The military seized on the TTP's June 7 attack on the

country's main civilian airport in Karachi to prevail on the government to give it the green light for its long-planned offensive in North Waziristan, which serves both as the TTP's principal base and a sanctuary for groups such as the "Haqqani network" and the Afghan Taliban that are fighting US forces in Afghanistan.

The US, it need be noted, has for years been pressuring Islamabad to invade North Waziristan. In announcing the offensive, military spokesman, Major General Asim Saleem Bajwa said, "On the direction of the government, the armed forces have launched a comprehensive operation against foreign and local terrorists hiding in sanctuaries in North Waziristan."

Sharif appeared in parliament Monday to endorse the offensive and urge all Pakistanis to give the military their full support. He vowed that the offensive would "not end till all terrorists are eliminated."

As in previous such military operations, the civilian population, overwhelmingly comprised of poor villagers, is bearing the brunt of the offensive.

The government gave no warning of the impending assault, cut off all electricity, blockaded all roads leading out of North Waziristan, and until Wednesday—that is for more than three days—imposed a blanket shoot-on-sight curfew. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people were trapped without food, water and medicine.

In interviews with a Reuters reporter, residents who subsequently succeeded in escaping North Waziristan complained bitterly about the military's indifference to the civilian population. "Waziristan was our paradise, but the Taliban and security forces turned it into a hell," said farmer Khair Mohammad. "I didn't want to leave, but my children developed serious mental problems because of the bombings by fighter jets and heavy artillery shelling by security forces."

Bank manager Wali Khan said the Islamist insurgents had "mysteriously" slipped away either shortly before or immediately after the offensive started, "but security forces continued to conduct raids on our houses and harass

innocent people.”

Effectively conceding that the military is using indiscriminate bombardment and scorched-earth methods, one official told the *Express Tribune* that “the real challenge would be” post-offensive “rehabilitation and rebuilding.”

Since Wednesday possibly as many as 275,000 people have fled North Waziristan, joining some 70,000 who left in the days preceding the launching of Zarb-e-Azb. Several tens of thousands have crossed over into Afghanistan, but the majority have sought refuge in Bannu, the adjoining district in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

“Some 157,000 people have arrived in Bannu from different areas of North Waziristan,” Arshad Khan, the head of FATA’s Disaster Management Authority, told AFP Friday, and thousands more refugees were reportedly seen on roads traveling to Bannu by foot.

Earlier in the week, Khan had complained that unlike in the past his authority had not been instructed in advance to make preparations to deal with large number of persons displaced by a military operation. He also said that the curfew was making it impossible for his agency to assist civilians trapped in the war zone.

The US, which has showered more than three hundred drone missiles on FATA during the five-and-a-half years of the Obama administration, launched two missile strikes in North Waziristan last week killing 16 people. A third strike this Wednesday summarily executed 5 more.

The Pakistani government has issued pro forma condemnations of the US’s violation of Pakistani sovereignty. And on Thursday, a Pakistan Foreign Ministry spokesman took great exception when a reporter suggested that the drone strikes were being coordinated with the Pakistani government and military.

But last week, a senior Pakistani government official had boasted to Reuters about the CIA’s “complete coordination” of its drone strikes with army headquarters in Rawalpindi. Said the unnamed official, “It is now policy that the Americans will not use drones without permission from the security establishment here.” Underlining the importance of this coordination, he added, “We understand that drones will be an important part of our fight against the Taliban now.”

The drone strikes underscore that the Pakistani military’s offensive in North Waziristan is being closely coordinated with Washington and the Pentagon. It is part of the US drive to militarily reconfigure the AfPak region prior to the Pentagon drawing down troop levels in Afghanistan, so as to concentrate on implementing Washington’s anti-China “Pivot to Asia” and expanding NATO’s presence in Eastern Europe so as to threaten and bully Russia.

Moreover, this offensive is only the latest ruinous consequence of the Pakistani bourgeoisie’s reactionary six-

decade-old alliance with US imperialism. At the US’s behest, Islamabad armed and organized Islamicist militias in the late 1970s and 1980s to overthrow the pro-Soviet government in Afghanistan. Later it gave pivotal support to the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, turning large parts of FATA into a killing field so as to suppress opposition to the imperialist subjugation of Afghanistan.

US Secretary of State John Kerry met Sharif’s Security Advisor, Sartaj Aziz, in London last week as the Pakistani military made final preparations for its offensive. Speaking with reporters prior to the meeting, Kerry emphasized the importance of Washington’s strategic partnership with its “old friend” Pakistan. “Pakistan is very, very key now [and] has been for 70 years,” said Kerry. He then made specific reference to “the transition in Afghanistan,” “the new government in India,” which the US plans to make a pillar of its anti-China Asian Pivot and “certain challenges that we’re both facing in terms of counterterrorism.”

US State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki strongly endorsed the militarily assault on North Waziristan at a press conference Monday. Blithely ignoring Washington’s illegal drone war in Pakistan, she declared, “We’ve long supported Pakistan efforts to extend their sovereignty throughout the country and stability throughout the country.”

With the exception of the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, Pakistan’s entire political establishment is supporting the military offensive in North Waziristan. This includes the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)—the traditional “left” bourgeois party, which expanded Pakistan’s support for the Afghan War and imposed IMF austerity when it led Pakistan’s government from 2008 through 2013—and Imran Imran Khan’s conservative nationalist Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI, Movement for Justice). Under conditions where the working class was prevented by pseudo-left groups like The Struggle and the Labour Party of Pakistan from challenging the PPP government and opposing the Afghan War from an anti-imperialist standpoint, the PTI was able to exploit mass antiwar sentiment, leading mass rallies against the US drone strikes. Now the third largest party in Pakistan’s parliament and the governing party in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the PTI voted Monday for a parliamentary motion welcoming the offensive in North Waziristan.



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