

Pakistan military's North Waziristan offensive provokes humanitarian crisis

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A long-prepared Pakistan military offensive targeting North Waziristan—a Pashtun-speaking, historically autonomous tribal agency—is now in its sixth week, laying waste to more towns and villages. The offensive, which has involved blanket bomb and artillery attacks, has driven more than 900,000 people from their homes, provoking a humanitarian crisis that, because of hot weather, disease and the lack of government support, could easily become a catastrophe.

Washington has long demanded that Pakistan take the offensive against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and allied Islamic fundamentalist militias that have provided support and “safe haven” to the insurgents challenging the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan. The current operation—the largest undertaken by the Pakistani military since 2009—is being closely coordinated with the Pentagon and the Obama administration.

Pakistani authorities claim to have killed more than 400 “militants,” while suffering the loss of 25 soldiers. But it is very difficult to establish what is really going on, since the government has banned journalists visiting the area, apart from one brief, stage-managed tour of Miran Shah, or what is left of it. North Waziristan’s main town, Miran Shah has largely been reduced to rubble by the military’s intense bombardment.

Despite the evidence of indiscriminate aerial bombardment, neither the military nor the government will concede the offensive has resulted in any loss of civilian life—a claim that many of the civilians displaced by the operation have angrily disputed. In Orwellian fashion, Pakistani authorities have declared that anyone who remains in the 4,707 sq. kilometre (1,817 sq. mile) agency following a government evacuation order must be a “terrorist.” Yet thousands, if not tens of thousands, of civilians who were either unable to flee or feared the loss of their livestock remain in North Waziristan.

The government and military are refusing to provide a

timeframe for the conclusion of the operation, which they have dubbed *Zarb e Azb* (after a sword said to have been wielded by Mohammad). On the operation’s launch, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said it would “not end till all terrorists are eliminated.”

The offensive’s devastating impact on the civilian population is underscored by the scope of the IDP (internally displaced persons) crisis. The government claimed that North Waziristan has a total population of 650,000, but more than 850,000 people have registered as IDPs with government and humanitarian agencies in the adjoining Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. And the United Nations has reported that a further 77,000 refugees from North Waziristan have taken shelter in tents set up at makeshift camps in Afghanistan’s war-ravaged Khost province.

According to a report issued by World Health Organization’s Health Cluster, 73 per cent of the 852,495 individuals newly registered as displaced in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are women and children. “The health of the displaced people is at a high risk due to overcrowding, poor living conditions, insecurity, psychosocial distress and exposure to new environment and risk factors,” the report said. It also warns that hot summer weather is aggravating a recent spurt in “Acute Watery Diarrhoea” cases.

Malnutrition is already prevalent among the children, added the report, and there is a risk of a major polio outbreak as many children have not been vaccinated. The Taliban stepped up their opposition to polio vaccination, including killing medical workers involved in polio vaccinations, after the US criminally used the ruse of a polio-vaccination campaign to help locate Osama bin Laden.

The government, which is now in the midst of implementing yet another austerity drive, has done little to provide for the immediate food and medical needs of the

displaced, let alone set aside resources for their repatriation and North Waziristan's socioeconomic development.

Even before they were displaced, the people of North Waziristan were living in dire conditions. "They have dealt with historic marginalization, underdevelopment, high poverty levels and, of late, the polio epidemic," wrote Raza Rumi, a Pakistani political analyst for CNN, on June 26.

Omitted from Rumi's list is the destruction and distress caused by the US drone war. US drones have patrolled North Waziristan for years. They have launched some 250 separate missile attacks to summarily execute—in flagrant violation of Pakistani sovereignty and international law—Islamist insurgents and killed, in the process, hundreds of civilians, including women and children.

In conjunction with the Pakistani military offensive, the US has revived its drone war in North Waziristan. Four days before the offensive was officially launched, the US mounted its first drone missile strike in Pakistan in almost six months. Since then, it has staged five more, all in North Waziristan, including three in the past two weeks that are said to have killed 35 people. The last attack rained eight missiles on a compound in the village of Doga Mada Khel.

Pakistan's government and military have provided crucial logistical support for the US occupation of Afghanistan since it began thirteen years ago and toward that end have turned the country's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into a killing field. The current invasion is aimed at strategically restructuring the Afghan-Pakistan border region so as to strengthen the US-aligned governments in Kabul and Islamabad prior to the US drawing down its forces in Afghanistan, so it can concentrate on its strategic offensives against China and Russia.

Not coincidentally, just days after Pakistan launched *Zarb e Azb* the US Senate Appropriations Committee approved a bill that allocates Pakistan nearly a billion dollars in assistance in the next fiscal year. However, US lawmakers are threatening to hold back \$300 million in military aid to Pakistan unless it makes the "Haqqani network"—an Islamist group that has staged some of the deadliest attacks on US forces in Afghanistan—a major target of the current offensive.

The US political elite and military-security apparatus have long accused Pakistan's ISI spy agency of maintaining ties with Haqqani Network as "insurance" against the spread of Indian influence in Afghanistan.

In a July 6 *Washington Post* interview with *theStreet* Pakistan Defence Minister Khawaja Asif denied that Haqqani Network would be spared, vowing "We will eliminate all sorts of terrorists from our area without any exception."

Seeking to deflect the pressure from the US establishment, Asif blurted out that it was at the US's behest that Pakistan began organizing and arming Islamist militants in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, then noted that in the Middle East Washington is continuing to use such forces as its proxies in overthrowing governments deemed inimical to US interests.

Referring to the US-led, Pakistani-supported campaign to organize the Mujahedeen to fight the Soviet-supported government in Kabul, Asif said it was "a made in America jihad": "These groups were useful to (the US) in the 80s. The groups were useful to us also, at some stage."

Asif then called it "shameful" that the US is "supporting" in Syria "the same people" it is fighting in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's venal bourgeois elite is using the North Waziristan offensive to strengthen the state apparatus under conditions of mounting social crisis and popular anger over growing economic insecurity and social inequality. Recently the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-led government increased the defence allocation by 11 percent, making it almost a fifth of the total national budget. Moreover, the government has announced plans to deploy the military "at sensitive installations" in major cities across the country, claiming that such deployments are necessary to prevent terrorist attacks.

Little more than two weeks after the launching of *Zarb e Azb*, Pakistan's parliament adopted the draconian Protection of Pakistan Bill. This legislation empowers security forces to shoot alleged terrorist suspects on sight and legalizes a series of longstanding abusive practices of the security forces such as prolonged arrest without trial and in secret. Repeatedly Pakistani authorities have used repressive legislation to suppress strikes and other militant protests, with security forces designating their participants "terrorists.



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