

Pakistan government prepares for long-term war

By [Peter Symonds](#)

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Refugees continue to flood out of embattled areas of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) as the military extends its offensive in the Swat, Buner and Lower Dir districts against Taliban militants. The UNHCR puts the total number of people registered as internally displaced at more than 670,000 since May 2, but the figure is certainly higher.

Speaking in London after meeting with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari pledged to continue the so-called fight against terrorism, saying that it would be "a long term affair". Under intense pressure from the US and its allies, the Pakistani government last month abrogated a peace deal with Taliban leaders in the Swat district and gave the green light for major military operations against the Islamist guerrillas.

The military has continued to pound Taliban strongholds from the air and using artillery and mortars, causing widespread destruction and a mounting toll of civilian casualties. Mingora, the district capital of the Swat Valley, which is still under Taliban control, has been a main target of the army's operations. Troops have seized key positions around the town, all exit roads have been sealed and electricity, water and gas supplies have been cut off.

A student, Farhan, told the BBC: "We left Mingora three days ago. The situation had become very dangerous. We were caught up in the brutalities between the Pakistani army and the Taliban. We were trapped inside our homes for a week, while there was constant shelling. A mortar demolished a house just a few yards from our home. There was no water, no power, everything was destroyed."

On Tuesday, army commandos were inserted by helicopters on high ground near the town of Piochar in northern Swat to carry out "search-and-destroy missions." Piochar is reportedly the base of Maulana Fazlullah, one of the main Taliban warlords, and the site of training camps and arms depots. "Jetfighters and helicopter gunships shelled the region before dropping special services group (SSG) personnel," a military's media centre stated.

News from the war zone is scanty as reporters and other independent observers have been excluded. Locals told Dawn yesterday that troops had also been dropped by helicopter in the Niag Darra, Karo Darra and Turmang Darra areas of the Dir district. Other sources confirmed that 1,200 troops backed by tanks and artillery had reached Turmang Darra in Upper Dir on Tuesday.

Pakistani army spokesman Major General Athar Abbas told the press yesterday that military operations were unfolding successfully. He stated that 751 militants had been killed by the army over the past week, with the loss of just 29 troops. The claim is highly doubtful and has not been independently verified. Estimates put the total number of Taliban fighters in the area at just 5,000.

Refugees from Mingora have criticised the military for indiscriminately pounding the town. "We have never seen major casualties on the militants' side so far and only innocent people are targeted," Fazi Karim told Dawn. A rickshaw driver, Syed Bacha, simply laughed when asked about the army's claim, saying: "If they kill 100 militants, I am 100 percent sure that the Taliban will not stay for a single day."

The US-based Human Rights Watch stated on Monday that it had received reports of "civilian deaths and the destruction of property in the Pakistani military's aerial bombardment."

Clearly concerned about growing public anger, Pakistan's army chief General Ashfaq Kayani issued a public statement instructing the armed forces "to ensure minimum collateral damage". Such assurances count for nothing, however, as the military continues to use heavy weapons and air strikes against urban areas such as Mingora. A parliamentarian from Swat told Dawn that 700,000 people remain trapped in the Swat Valley.

Similar tactics were employed by the Pakistani military last year in a protracted offensive in Bajaur, part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the border with Afghanistan. The operations, which were coordinated with the US military in Afghanistan, laid waste to entire towns and villages, forcing half a million people to flee. Combined with the current exodus, 1.3 million people have been displaced in Pakistan since last August.

A key aspect of the summit in Washington between the US, Pakistani and Afghan presidents a fortnight ago was the closer involvement of the US military with its Pakistani counterparts, including a significant expansion of counterinsurgency training. About 70 US special operations trainers have already been in Pakistan to help drill commando forces such as those currently being used in the NWFP. The Obama administration is also requesting \$400 million for the Pakistan Counterinsurgency Capability Fund to provide night-vision goggles, more helicopters and better small arms to the Pakistani military.

The US military and CIA are also stepping up their missile attacks on alleged "terrorist" targets inside Pakistan using Predator and Reaper drones. The latest strike killed 15 people in the village of Sra Khawra in the FATA district of South Waziristan. The Los Angeles Times yesterday reported that the Pentagon has established a facility in the Afghan city of Jalalabad for US and Pakistani personnel to jointly operate US military drones. In addition, the CIA, which has its own Predator program, has carried out at least 55 strikes inside Pakistan since August, generating widespread anger among Pashtun tribes in the FATA region.

Speaking to Al Jazeera on Tuesday, US Special Envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, rejected the suggestion that Washington was responsible for exacerbating civilian suffering in Pakistan, blaming the Taliban for the fighting. However, having pressed the Pakistani government into taking military action, the Obama administration is directly responsible for the human tragedy now unfolding.

UNHRC spokeswoman Ariane Rummery announced yesterday in Islamabad that the total influx of registered refugees had jumped in the past 11 days to 670,906, of whom 79,842 were being housed in camps. Some of those not in camps were staying with relatives and friends, but many were forced to live in makeshift shelters without access to food and medicine. The UNHCR total was up from 501,496 late on Tuesday. Pakistani officials have put the number of internally displaced persons at over 800,000.

Speaking to the BBC about the situation in Peshawar, Majid, a student who fled Mingora, explained: “Many [people] joined refugee camps, but those must be full, because I see lots of people lying on the roads, people for whom there’s no accommodation or help. The nearby park is full of people from Swat. There are Swat people all over the city, everyone with their own story.”

Far from being concerned about the plight of these refugees, the Pakistani establishment is preoccupied with intensifying its “war on terrorism”. In a meeting of the National Assembly on Tuesday, virtually all parties—government and opposition—came together to back the military offensive. Ominously calls were made for an extension of police state measures throughout the country to “eliminate sleeper cells” and other “terrorist” bastions.

What is being set in motion by the Pakistani government, pushed on by Washington, is a full-scale civil war.

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