

The Rotten Fruits of War: U.S. Drone Attacks over Pakistan

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Five months ago, shortly after the Pakistani government had begun a military offensive against suspected Taliban fighters in the northernmost area of the country, we arrived in Islamabad, the capital, as part of a small delegation organized by Voices for Creative Nonviolence (www.vcnv.org). Our initial travel plans had focused on learning more about civilian suffering caused by U.S. drone attacks. But, over the course of our three-week visit, close to 3 million people had become uprooted by violence in the Swat Valley and neighboring districts. Visiting tent encampments and abandoned buildings to which people had fled, we spoke with people who identified themselves as poor people, with meager resources, who were anxious to return to their homes as soon as possible. They were also alarmed because they feared that their crops, animals, shops and stores were already destroyed.

Now that the military offensive in Swat has wound down, Pakistan's government officials have labeled the operation a success. They claim to have cleared the area of Taliban fighters and have commenced a new military offensive in South Waziristan.

A closer look reveals a very different story.

Many families from Swat and surrounding districts returned to find that their homes, crops and other means of survival have been damaged or destroyed. Such circumstances force many to rely heavily on food aid. According to Amjad Jamal, a spokesperson for the World Food Program (WFP), "around 2.4 million displaced people received aid from the WFP food hubs last month."

The WFP announced today that they are temporarily closing 20 food hubs in the North West Frontier Province citing concerns of worsening security.

Reporting from a Pakistani field hospital run by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the BBC met with scores of victims wounded by land mine explosions. The father of a 14 year old boy whose hands were blown off while he was playing with a piece of unexploded ordnance expressed anger over the government's failure to remove the land mines before telling people it was safe to return. The father worked as a jeweler before the military offensive began, but after he and his family fled the fighting, his shop was looted; now he has no income, and his home was damaged in the shelling.

The BBC also reported that more than 200 corpses, believed to be bodies of suspected Taliban, have been found across the valley in recent weeks. Pakistan's independent Human

Rights Commission has called for an investigation into reports of numerous extra-judicial killings and reprisals carried out by security forces.

Dr. Aasim Sajjad, a professor at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, believes that the Taliban's numbers will grow as a result of Pakistan's military offensives. "The hundreds of thousands languishing in refugee camps talk of the mortar shells that have destroyed their homes and killed their relatives," says Dr. Sajjad. "They seethe with anger and warn the government that most Taliban fighters hail from the local population. The longer the war continues — and it has only just begun in this region — the better the chances that the Taliban will be able to recruit from the refugees." (Monthly Review "War, Islamists and the Left," July 7, 2009)

Yesterday's deadly suicide bombing at the Islamic University in Islamabad was the latest in a series of the Taliban's recent reprisal attacks against the Pakistani government that have claimed the lives of over 150 people.

Military offensives that promise to smash or eradicate "the bad guys" may accomplish short-term "successes" by locking up or killing armed resisters and promising that the military will provide peace and security. But military establishments aren't set up to address the long-term, desperate grievances that afflict impoverished people and give rise to support for militant groups of resisters.

According to conservative estimates, 75% of Pakistan's population of 170 million lives on less than \$2 a day. The majority of Pakistanis yearn for food security, clean water, a livelihood that can sustain their families and education that will help their children break out of impoverishment. Young men who are jobless, shut out of education are resentful of social structures that favor wealthy landowners and other elites and they are drawn to Taliban groups that promise a Robin Hood sort of redistribution. These Taliban groups have been dealt a temporary setback by the military offensive, but the fundamental problems of hunger, lack of clean water, illiteracy and joblessness haven't been tackled.

Meanwhile, U.S. drone attacks continue, in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Using "eyes in the skies" by piloting Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, (UAVs or drones), the U.S. analysts can see and attack suspected Taliban or Al Qaida fighters, along with anyone else who might happen to be in the vicinity. But the UAVs won't help us understand the acute need for humanitarian relief, diplomacy, negotiation and dialogue in a region already overwhelmed by attacks, counter-attacks, bloodshed and death.

Whether it is in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq or even in the U.S., as we've seen in recent years, war takes its heaviest toll on the poorest. It is a profound mistake to believe that military force is a solid foundation for peace.

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