

“War on terror” causes mass exodus in Swat

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The mass exodus from Swat is making headlines globally. Over a million have been displaced. This is the worst humanitarian crisis since the Rwanda tragedy in 1990s. The explanation offered is that this is necessary to flush the Taliban out of Swat’s lush-green valley in Pakistan’s north. This military operation, launched in order to stabilize the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and its so-called “war on terror,” is hardly mentioned in the corporate media. On the contrary, major U.S. newspapers have been invoking the fear that Pakistani nukes might fall into the hands of Taliban. Is this a story planted by the CIA?

This is the fourth time in less than three years that the Swat area has been subjected to a military operation. However the latest offensive is of a different character.

First, this military operation was hastily launched. The United States threatened to use drones in Swat if the Taliban were not stopped from advancing into the neighboring districts of Dir and Boner.

Second, it is not a mock operation. This time the army is targeting the Taliban.

Third, the mainstream Pakistani media and major political parties are openly supporting this military action. Previously the mainstream Islamist and right-wing parties, including former prime minister Nawaz Sharif’s PML-N, were sympathetic to the Taliban and opposed targeting them. This time around, the PML-N is siding with the ruling coalition, led by Bhutto’s PPP.

The general public is turning against the Taliban. The swing in the public’s perception was catalyzed by a video showing the Taliban whipping a girl. This shocked Pakistanis. However Taliban spokesperson Muslim Khan defended the punishment and asserted that the girl should have been stoned.

While the media had been dominated by pro-Taliban anchor persons and columnists, they are not siding with the Taliban this time. Ridiculed as Media Mujahidin, many pro-Taliban journalists have now begun criticizing them. However it is the liberals in the media who are proving to be the worst warmongers. Back in 1999 they were the first to welcome the military takeover, hoping that General Musharraf would rid Pakistan of the “beards.” Later, disillusioned by Musharraf, they pinned all their hope on Uncle Sam.

Ironically one finds far-left and Islamist parties on the same side of the fence: both oppose the military operation, but for different reasons.

FAR LEFT AND FAR RIGHT ON SAME SIDE OF THE FENCE

Islamist parties see an opportunity for themselves with the Talibanisation of the society. Even if Islamists did not bag more than four percent of the votes in the 2008 general election, they have been able to encroached on Pakistan’s democratic and social liberties. Only couple of weeks ago two elite colleges in Lahore, 400 kilometers from Swat, introduced a dress code on their respective campuses: girl students have been advised not to wear jeans and to dress modestly.

The far left, on the other hand, considers military action counter-productive. The left views Taliban

as a threat to civil society and particularly the working classes. But the threat cannot be bombed out of existence.

In the wake of 9/11, U.S. forces drove the Taliban out of Kabul, but only temporarily. Not merely are the Taliban back in Afghanistan, but Pakistan's Tribal Areas and Frontier province have gone over to the Taliban.

Pakistan's leading left-wing group, the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP), in a recent press statement opposing the military operation, declared: *"The fight against religious extremism can only be successful insofar as the basic problems of the working class in social, political and economic fields are solved. In addition to developing a system of free education with a secular syllabus for all, this must mean an end to feudalism, implementation of land reform and an end to the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan."*

The military operation in Swat covers up the reality that the Pakistan military considers the Taliban an asset and is not willing to sacrifice that asset to please the USA. While army is flushing the Taliban out of Swat, the Jihadi-infrastructure (training camps, seminaries, newspapers, charities that front for the Taliban) remain intact in other parts of the country.

THE PAKISTAN MILITARY IS PART OF THE PROBLEM

The Jihadi infrastructure cannot be dismantled by any civil government because the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the all-powerful intelligence wing of the military, blocks all such attempts. Ironically, the residents of Swat who are now displaced by the military's Operation Rah-e-Haq 4, upon reaching refugee camps find themselves hosted by Lashkar-e-Tayyaba.

It was the LeT that engineered the terrorist attack on Bombay last November by eight black-hooded gunmen. Following the Bombay episode, the Pakistan government banned the LeT and the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JD), its charity front.

According to the *Guardian* newspaper, *"The Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation (FIF) offers food, medical care and transport to villagers fleeing into Mardan district."* Citing experts and some FIF members, the newspaper asserts that the group is merely the renamed relief wing of Jamaatud Dawa, a group the Pakistani government banned last December after the UN declared it a terrorist organization.

The FIF relief camp is located outside Sher Gur in Mardan, a few hundred meters from the border with Malakand, where the fighting is concentrated. Present in the camp is Abdur Rauf, the FIF head and the former head of Dawa's welfare wing. Rauf told the *Guardian* that the group's 24-hour kitchens had fed 53,000 people in roadside camps and schools where people were living. He added that a fleet of 23 mini buses had transported victims from the battle zone. Seven ambulances took the injured to hospital.

This is not for the first time that a militant outfit was prescribed but remained functional, simply under a different name. Under U.S. pressure, General Musharraf banned half a dozen groups, but all these outfits remain operative only with a name change.

The military refuses to give these outfits up for two reasons. One, a substantial section of Pakistan military, particularly the ISI, has an ideological bond with the bearded militants. Second, the military wishfully plans to use these irregulars in a proxy force that can re-capture Kabul and keep things boiling in Kashmir.

As a matter of fact, the Taliban would not have been able to establish a foothold in Swat had they not been lent a helping hand by Khakis (army). Most importantly is the fact that the Taliban has had a

radio station for many years. This radio played a crucial role in establishing Taliban control precisely because it gave them an effective method to transmit their propaganda. In fact, Fazlulla, the Taliban warlords in control of Swat, earned the nickname Mullahs Radio. For four years, the military was “unable” to locate the radio site or jam its transmission. Meanwhile Mullahs Radio was threatening Swat residents by issuing fatwas and intimidating opponents every day after morning prayers. Hence the slogan gaining popularity:

Yeh jo dehshatgardi hey

Iss key peechay wardi hey

(Behind all this terrorism is the military).

WHY PAKISTAN MILITARY HELPED TALIBANIZE SWAT

In the wake of 9/11 the hawks in the Pakistan military developed the perspective of “defeating” the USA through a proxy-Taliban militia, the way the Red Army was driven across the Oxus River. Thus, in a short-sighted and roundabout way, the Pakistan military brought Uncle Sam into Pakistan.

Under U.S. pressure, General Musharraf’s regime took some cosmetic measures against Jihadi elements, but it did not touch the Taliban. Every time it was asked to do more, some Arab militants were rounded up and sent to the Gitmo Gulag. However, because of his pro-U.S. policies certain Jihadist elements turned against Musharraf and tried to assassinate him. The Musharraf regime consequently targeted these elements but nonetheless kept patronizing those willing to co-operate.

In order to wage a proxy war against NATO/US forces, Khakis helped the Taliban turn the Tribal Areas and districts of the frontier province into their base camp. The locals resisted the Taliban take over but their out-dated guns proved no match for the modern arsenal at Taliban’s disposal.

These Taliban-controlled regions became a launching pad for Jihadist activities in Afghanistan. Then the Bush White House, irritated at the dual role played by Pakistan military, decided to take matters in its own hands. Since 2006 it has been using drones to attack suspected Taliban hideouts in the Tribal Areas. During the waning months of Bush’s office these attacks became more frequent but have escalated since the beginning of Obama’s presidency. “*When in doubt, escalate the war is an old imperial motto,*” Tariq Ali reminds us. In fact, the drone strikes against Pakistan bring to mind President Nixon’s desperate bid to salvage the Vietnam war by bombing and invading Cambodia.

Over 700 people have been killed in U.S. drone attacks on Pakistan since 2006, with 164 killed in 14 attacks under Obama’s watch. These drone attacks are further fueling anti-U.S. sentiments.

Instead of finding an exit strategy in Afghanistan, the Obama administration is practicing an Iraq-style surge. But it is U.S. presence in the region that will sustain the conditions that breed Talibanisation. The longer the USA stays in Afghanistan, the longer the Taliban’s defeat will be delayed and the suffering of the poor masses prolonged. For those lucky enough to survive bombs dropped by the Pakistan military in Swat, they will also have to deal with the possibility of having their throats slit by Taliban hit squads. Or they have the option to become refugees in their own country.