

# **Pakistan and the Swat war: political situation, IDPs camps and women voices**

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With the deepening crisis in valley of Swat, more and more displaced families are pouring in Mardan, Swabi, Peshawar and other areas of Pakhtunkhawa. Though independent media and state now confirm over 1.5 million people are displaced from Swat as a result of 3<sup>rd</sup> military operation against Taliban in less than two years, the exact number is believed at 2 million as hundreds of families are waiting yet to be registered.

I recently visited three of the camps, set up in Mardan for the displaced population from Swat. These include camps of Shaikh Yasin, Shaikh Shahzad and Sarhadi Lutheran Church camp in surroundings of Mardan city. There are 1.354 families with 12.638 persons in Shaikh Yasin camp, 1.914 families with 8.065 persons in Shaikh Shahzad camp, while 42 families comprising 200 persons are lodged in Sarhadi Lutheran Church camp. In total there are 32.725 persons lodged in the four camps.

Most of the internally displaced people (IDPs) belong to working class, while the affluent people of Swat fled early and managed to take refuge either in the houses of their relatives/friends or in government school building, much better than the tents. According to District Nazim of Mardan, there are 1.23 million IDPs living with host families in Mardan, while 611 school buildings are being used to provide shelter to IDPs. As the number of IDPs is increasing, the province Pakhtunkhawa has requested other provinces to share the burden but the provinces of Punjab (being ruled by Nawaz Sharif Party PML-N) and Sindh (being ruled by Bhutto's PPP and MQM) are showing reluctance. Thousands of IDPs travelling to Sindh were stopped the other day at the border of Punjab-Sindh. They were not allowed to enter in Sindh. This will directly give rise to Pakhtoon nationalism against other nationalities.

As far as possible period of IDPs stay, no body is sure about that. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Lower Dir, Buner and Swat districts would stay in relief camps for a year or two before they are rehabilitated to their native areas. Meanwhile foreign aid had started pouring in for IDPs. Donations include \$110 million from the US, \$43.50 million from Japan, \$18.54 million from the UK, \$16.32 million from France, \$17.67 million from Germany, \$9.52 million from the European Commission, \$4.32 million from Canada, \$2.75 million from Norway and \$1 million each from Denmark and China.

## **Taliban, Army and US are part of the problem**

Despite this hefty amount of foreign aid the poor situation of IDPs in these camps speaks volumes about hollow political and moral rhetoric of the provincial as well as federal governments. A number of IDPs including men, women and children shared their views on Taliban, the Army and America. A majority of the IDPs was of the view that both Americans and Taliban are evil, who have made peoples' lives hell by flushing them out of their homes. They told that a majority of the population has migrated from Swat but still some people have stuck in Swat. The army has asked these people to vacate area as soon as possible otherwise they will be treated as Taliban. The relatives in camps have no information about them as the Army has cut off all communication means.

People were equally critical of the military operation in Swat and they believe that it is launched under US pressure against Taliban. "The Army is also connived with some groups of Taliban and it is not sincere to crush them. Many Taliban have gone into hiding in safe places and civilians are being killed in the name of collateral damage", some men at the camps viewed. They demanded of the government to give deadline of this operation as they wanted to go back to their homes as early as possible. Some of the IDPs opined that the Americans have finally got what they wanted thanks to the pusillanimity of our civilian and military leadership - and all for the sake of temporary-relief dollars.

Some elderly men surrounded us and wanted to have their opinion on record. They were of the view that " If mere heavy artillery, aerial bombardment and helicopter gunship could win the fight for the state, the US would have been victorious in Vietnam, in Iraq and in Afghanistan and the Pakistani state would have succeeded in what was then East Pakistan and in Balochistan in 1973 and 2006. But history tells a different story and unfortunately we have learnt no lessons from our past".

## **Positions of the Left and Right**

Contrary to their previous stance, major political and right-wing groups, including PML-N of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif who has been opposing Drone attacks targeting Taliban, are now openly backing military operation in Swat. It is believed the change in stance is result of US pressure on PML- N through Saudi Arabia.

Only far right like Jammat-e-Islami and far left parties like LPP are openly opposing the military operation and US Drone attacks. The left forces think military action is not a right solution of the issue. They are against military operation and Drone attacks. The only way out, they suggest, is to empower and equip local people through defence committees to defend themselves against Taliban.

The provincial government of Awami National party as PPP federal government earlier struck a deal with Taliban in Swat subduing to their demand for imposition of Islamic system. But when Taliban did not surrender arms according to this deal the popular public perception turned against the Taliban. Which provided a government opportunity to launch military operation in Swat?

## **Life in IDPs camps**

Notwithstanding the fact that every family has been provided with a tent and no body is without shelter, life is miserable for these families in the sizzling heat with mercury above 40 degree Celsius. It is hard to imagine life in the tents with no electricity, poor food, with hostile weather and poor amenities. They got displaced into a hostile climate zone and are not used to living in these kinds of

temperatures.

There were few dispensaries sans quality medicines and proper treatment. Due to poor medical services a large number of people, specially elderly people and children, are suffering from diseases like diarrhoea, dysentery, skin disease, eye sore, throat infection due to the consumption of unsafe drinking water, smell from filthy toilets and inappropriate food, etc. Water availability is also poor. Families have to use same water tank meant for toilet as well drinking purposes. Water purification tablets are provided to families but due to lack of orientation only few women use these tablets. The situation of Unicef-made pit toilets is very bad as there is no water supply system to these toilets. They are full of odour smell. Moreover, absence of washrooms and separate toilets for women has added to the miseries of women. These filthy toilets being close to living is a permanent source of unpleasant smell.

As far as food is concerned the local municipal corporation of Mardan has outsourced the provision of meals to local contractors. These contractors prepare food in big pots (Degs) and distribute among the people standing in queues. In these queues one can see only men and children getting food. Women do not come out of their tents to get their share of food. The usual breakfast is tea and chapatti (sometimes left over), lunch comprises daal/beef with chapatti, while dinner is normally daal and rice with tea. Most people have complaints about the quality of food. They told that separate food should be prepared for elderly people, children and pregnant mothers.

The good thing is that small children are duly engaged in educational activities. Unicef is providing primary educational service to these children, including school bags and books. Since government schools are closed in Mardan, and teachers were free, these government school teachers have offered their services to teach children in tent schools.

### **Women are the worst victims**

Women issues are most prominent aspect at IDPs camps. A 25-member crew of government Women Health Workers is based at these camps. They told us that lack of medicines for IDPs especially pregnant women is a vital problem. There are around 100 pregnant women living in Sheikh Yasin Camp but there are not enough medicines for these women. These women are highly vulnerable to hot and adverse climatic conditions. They also have not adequate health facilities in case of emergency. These women are in dire need of better accommodation, multi vitamins, including proper food with milk and fruits etc. These pregnant women along with their families should be immediately shifted to comparatively better place with better climatic and health and food facilities.

One can observe girls up to 7/8 years roaming around camps but above that age, you cannot see any young girl or women around. Surely they are there but all invisible, concealed inside the tents. This is an additional misery to be a displaced woman, as they are to be confined inside the tent with dropped entrance. They said it is our culture, women cannot go outside. The horrible combination of strict religious norms and oppressive tribal culture has added to the woes of these women. This horrific misery is an enemy itself for these women.

Orphans and widows are facing more tough conditions. To get food and relief items you have to stand in the queue but women and young orphan girls do not ready to come out of their "ovens". So in most cases they are ignored and deprived of their right. The women have a lot to share. Every body has a story to tell but pathetic are the stories of women inside these tents.

Jan sultana, a grandmother of a 2-year-old boy, told that she is looking after the child as his mother has been left behind in Swat and there is no information about her. She might be killed. The mother-

sick child was suffering from fever and chest infection for the last 15 days.

Hadia, a widow from village Qabaal in Swat, is mother of 6 children. But only three residing with her, the rest of the three are stuck back in Qabaal. She told that 6 months ago she and her husband got injured in bombardment by Pakistan Army, killing her husband on the spot, while she got her right leg seriously injured. Her tent was very smelly and hot. She screamed that Taliban and Pakistan Army both are the killers.

Naheed from village Tahiraabd, Mingora told that she is mother of new born 3-day-old baby. She was at camp for the last 12 days. She had to travel much distance on foot in pregnant condition from Mingora to this camp. It took her 13 hours to reach here. "After three days of curfew the army forced us to leave the area, I was crying with pains, walking by foot all the way from Mingora about 15 Km. My feet were swollen and legs were aching", she said.

Yet another woman, Rajmeena, mother of nine, from Mingora town told that it took her 10 hours to reach this camp along with her 9 children. She was critical about tent size, food and health facilities. "This is the third war in span of two years and we are worried about the safety of our homes. Taliban are looters and murderers. They have killed many women who incidentally went out in the market without the company of any male member. They would plunder everything", she cried with tears in her eyes. "We want to go back to our homes; we want Taliban, Army and America out of our beautiful Swat".

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\* From the CADTM website:

<http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?artic...>