

Pakistan's war on civilians

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The extension of war in Pakistan - from the Afghan border regions to Lahore - is inflicting a terrible toll on the country's poor and displaced.

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The car-bombing in Lahore of a police station and the local headquarters of Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) agency on 27 May 2009 is more than the seventh major attack on the city since January 2008 [[1](#)] - and the third since March 2009, when the Sri Lankan cricket team and a police academy were targeted. The bomb, which killed twenty-seven people and injured over a hundred, is a further indication of the systemic, interrelated and deep-rooted nature of Pakistan's internal-security troubles. Paul Rogers is professor in the department of peace studies at Bradford University, northern England. He has been writing a weekly column on global security on openDemocracy since 26 September 2001

Lahore, after all, is Pakistan's cultural centre, a sophisticated city that lies close to India and is a long way from the intense fighting currently being waged in the Swat valley in North West Frontier Province (NWFP). If it can be repeatedly attacked with apparent impunity, it tells its own story about how the different parts of the country are becoming implicated in an all-consuming conflict [[2](#)].

The military machine

The exact link between the Lahore bombing - and the twin attacks that followed in Peshawar on 28 May that killed eleven people and injured dozens more - and what is happening in Swat is not yet clear, but Islamist militants in western Pakistan had threatened attacks across the country in response to the army's operations in the NWFP. What is clear, though, is that those operations are massive and sustained and are having huge human consequences, whatever the belief in Islamabad that they are necessary to counter the increasing power of the Taliban and other militias.

A United Nations source has estimated the flow of internal refugees since mid-May 2009 as 2.4 million people; by 29 May, the UN Children's Fund (Unicef) calculated that the figure exceeded 3 million. There are few examples of such vast and sudden movements in recent history; the scale of what is happening recalls the traumatic events prior to the founding of Bangladesh in 1970-71, when many millions of people fled from the Pakistani army across the border into India.

Much of the destruction in Swat is because the Pakistani army is simply not constructed for

counterinsurgency or counter-guerrilla warfare - and the conflict in Swat is a combination of this with an out-and-out civil war. Pakistan has a standing army of 550,000, equipped with nearly 2,500 main battle-tanks and over 4,000 artillery pieces, five times the size of the British army. That may be large by any standards; but the “threat” from India has long dominated the Pakistani military posture, and India commands well over a million troops, 4,000 tanks and more than 10,000 artillery pieces.

What is essentially a powerful land army geared to armoured battles and artillery bombardments on the plains of south Asia, is now engaged in a war against its own people in a bitter internal conflict that is being conducted under a blanket of tight media control. Because of this, every impression is being given of a successful campaign against weak opponents - the Taliban - who are being put to flight. Where foreign journalists can report at all, they do so under tight army control and the rare visits they are able to make are to towns that are firmly under the army’s control [3].

The civilian impact

Even so, two issues are emerging. One is that the assault will be prolonged and very violent. The army is readily using its huge firepower advantage, but the militias that it is trying to defeat are proving highly resilient. Even army sources now speak of “steady progress amid stiff resistance” and acknowledge that the war has some time to run [