

Pakistan: Operations in North Waziristan Agency

ALOK BANSAL

Pakistan has been going through tumult and despite Nawaz Sharif winning a resounding victory in 2013, the prospects of his government lasting five years have started looking bleak. The withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan by end 2014 is likely to create huge turbulence in the territories along the Durand Line. Civil-military relations are looking quite tenuous, the media is being muzzled, the chimera of talks with the militants is finally over and operations in North Waziristan have eventually started. The elections of 2013, which were held under the shadow of Taliban guns, had indicated support for right wing political parties and, consequently, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) came to power in Islamabad, while the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) of Imran Khan formed a government in Peshawar. Both political parties believed that the Taliban could be talked into shunning violence. Accordingly, the government went out of its way to talk to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), despite the TTP challenging the writ of the government in different parts of the country and targeting security installations and personnel.

As a result, the killing of Hakeemullah Mehsud, the dreaded TTP leader in a drone attack by the US was protested by the government and viewed as a deliberate attempt by the US to derail the talks with the TTP. The death of Hakeemullah was a major blow to the TTP, but in his successor Fazlullah, they have found an experienced and even more shrewd and radical leader. More

significantly, Fazlullah's election as TTP head was facilitated by Mullah Omar, the elusive leader of the Taliban. Despite Fazlullah's ascension to the leadership position, the political establishment in Pakistan continued to strive for talks with the TTP. While the process of talks was going on, the TTP continued targeting the security agencies and other government installations under the pretext that although the talks were going on, there was no ceasefire. It even slaughtered the 23 Frontier Corps troops that were in its custody whilst the negotiations were on. Subsequently, when the Taliban hideouts in North Waziristan and Khyber Agency were targeted by the Pakistan Air Force,¹ the TTP declared a unilateral one-month ceasefire, putting immense moral pressure on the government to follow suit. Nawaz accordingly directed the Army Chief to hold fire and the Army did so.²

The twin attacks on Karachi airport forced the government to launch a full-fledged operation against the TTP.

The ceasefire did not stop the attacks on the security forces and minorities, which continued unabated, but were blamed on outfits that were outside the umbrella of the TTP. Consequently, outfits like the Ahrar-ul Hind cropped up overnight and claimed responsibility for the suicide attacks in Pakistan.³ The TTP eventually decided not to extend the ceasefire, "as the government displayed its lack of sincerity by ignoring its demands to release non-combatant detainees and give the TTP a safe zone from which to operate." It, however, said it was willing to talk and the government again acquiesced by agreeing to do so.⁴ The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) meanwhile succeeded in creating some fissures within the TTP and even started shelling TTP positions in the periphery after some troops of paramilitary Frontier Corps were killed in an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blast.⁵ Despite this violence, the charade of talks continued and it was eventually the twin attacks on Karachi airport that forced the government to launch a full-fledged operation against the TTP in North Waziristan Agency. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks in Karachi, the US, after a hiatus of over five months, carried out two drone attacks in North Waziristan Agency on June 11 and 12, killing 14 Uzbek militants aligned with the TTP.⁶

Operation Zarb-e-Adb was formally launched on June 15, 2014, to eliminate the TTP in North Waziristan, and as has been the norm in counter-insurgency operations in Pakistan, began with fighter jets pounding the militants' positions. A large number of militant casualties were claimed in these air operations, which were supplemented by operations of helicopter gunships.

However, the reports emanating from the area claimed that the most of those killed were women and children, who were left behind by the people migrating from the region. The population was asked by the Pakistan Army to move out by June 26, but the aerial bombing started from day one. Over 930,000 people have already moved out of the region, but have not been provided with adequate food, clothing and shelter.⁷

The operation has continued for over five weeks and both the government and major opposition party have agreed on its continuation.⁸ After heavy pounding of the 'militants positions' by artillery shelling and aerial bombing, the ground operations reportedly began on the twelfth day, ie on June 26; however, the ground operations actually started on June 30. The operation is believed to have destroyed the command and control system of the TTP in North Waziristan Agency. Over 400 militants and 25 soldiers are reported to have been killed in the operations during the first five weeks; however, large tracts of areas within the North Waziristan Agency remain to be cleared. This shows that the armed forces are in for the long haul.⁹

There is no doubt that the armed forces will eventually succeed in clearing North Waziristan Agency and removing TTP presence from there. However, like Operation Rah-e-Rast in Swat Valley and Operation Rah-e-Nijaat in South Waziristan, this operation is not likely to result in the elimination or capture of the TTP leadership, who would have already moved out to different parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan. They will eventually make their presence felt in the region once the troops thin out from North Waziristan, after the operation. More significantly, with close to a million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), there will be no dearth of fresh recruits for the TTP, as the proud Pakhtuns feel humiliated by the way they have been forced to beg for the necessities of life during the holy month of Ramazan. On top of it, none of the other states is willing to accept the IDPs – the Chief Ministers of both Sindh and Punjab have ordered their borders to be sealed. This has aggravated the Pakhtuns' sense of alienation and made them feel as if they are not Pakistani citizens. The aerial bombing and shelling has resulted in widespread collateral damage and the family members of many of these innocent victims will be more than willing to join the TTP or to help it to garner new recruits for its cause.¹⁰

The IDPs, in the absence of any worthwhile machinery to look after them, will move to wherever they can find jobs. Consequently, most of them will eventually land up in Karachi, despite the instructions of the state government to seal Sindh's borders. The TTP already has significant influence within the metropolis and different factions control different parts of the city. Further

influx of IDPs will lead to further radicalisation of the city.¹¹ Sindhi nationalist parties are already protesting against the influx of IDPs into Karachi and other parts of the province, and feel that the resettlement of IDPs in Sindh will damage ethnic harmony by changing the demographic profile and further worsen the law and order situation in the province. They have also expressed the apprehension that this could lead to an outbreak of the polio virus in Sindh as a number of polio cases have been reported in Waziristan.¹² However, despite all the demonstrations and opposition, a large number of IDPs will land up in Karachi.

The long-term utility of the North Waziristan operation is questionable.

The long-term utility of the North Waziristan operation, so late, after allowing the TTP a free hand to consolidate there and with huge collateral damage that has alienated the population, is questionable. Even after the operation, people will find it extremely difficult to return to their homes and pick up threads as the complete infrastructure has been destroyed. Entire markets have been razed to the ground and most villages have been obliterated. A letter to the editor of *The News* sums it up best:

The government and armed forces decided in haste to launch an operation against the militants. An official estimate counted the total population of North Waziristan incorrectly and the actual number of uprooted people has reached one million. This only shows the miscalculations of the government. The price paid by the people of the agency is beyond imagination. No governmental help will ever restore to them their previous lifestyle. Certain people advocated the launch of the operation with such enthusiasm as if it was just a picnic for the army and the one million unfortunate people. So far, the government appears to have failed in providing facilities to the affected and they are made to wait and run after relief goods for hours in this burning heat and in this month of Ramazan which is not a joke but a serious and painful religious exercise in this unfriendly season of the year.¹³

The TTP has vowed revenge and in the days to come, could indulge in random acts of violence across Pakistan. This whole exercise will no doubt make the elimination of the TTP even more difficult, and will help it to spread its influence further. The presence of a large number of foreign militants from across the globe

with the TTP has enhanced its capabilities further, as was demonstrated in the attacks on Karachi airport. More significantly, the manner in which Fazlullah was elected as the new TTP Amir with Mullah Omar's blessings, has clearly highlighted the influence Mullah Omar and Al Qaeda wield over the TTP. It also shows that even the Afghan Taliban is now trying to distance itself from the ISI. To sum up, Pakistan is not going to be more secure, after this operation, which has been undertaken at a huge cost in terms of men and material.

Capt (IN) **Alok Bansal**, former Senior Fellow, CLAWS, is presently Executive Director of the South Asian Institute for Strategic Affairs (SAISA).

Notes

1. Amir Mir, "Govt to Adopt Carrot and Stick Policy with Taliban", *The News*, February 21, 2014, pp. 1, 4.
2. Ansar Abbasi and Mushtaq Paracha, "PM Asks Army to Hold Fire as Taliban Announce Ceasefire", *The News*, March 02, 2014, pp. 1,8.
3. Azaz Syed, "Hello, We Are Ahrarul Hind, We Attacked Islamabad", *The News*, March 04, 2014, pp. 1, 4.
4. "Cease", Editorial, *The News*, April 20, 2014, p. 7.
5. Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Nine Soldiers Die in NWA IED Blast", *The News* May 09, 2014, p. 1; also see "War and Chaos", Editorial, *The News*, May 10, 2014, p. 7.
6. Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Karachi's Aftermath", *The News on Sunday*, June 15, 2014, Encore, p. 35.
7. Mushtaq Yusufzai, "11 Killed in North Waziristan Drone Strike", *The News on Sunday*, July 20, 2014, pp. 1, 8.
8. Asim Yasin and Muhammad Saleh Zafir, "Nawaz, Khursheed Agree to Continue Operation," *The News*, July 20, 2014, p. 1.
9. "Terrorists' Command and Control System Destroyed in NWA: Asif," *The News on Sunday*, July 20, 2014, pp. 1, 8.
10. Aasim Zafar Khan, "Victory, Responsibility and Blame", *The News*, June 21, 2014, p. 6.
11. "War and Plight", Editorial, *The News*, June 21, 2014, p. 7.
12. Shamim Bano, "IDPs' Influx to Worsen Law & Order: SUP", *The News*, June 27, 2014, p. 13.
13. "The Uprooted Wazirs", Letter to the Editor by Ghani Khan Khattak, *The News*, July 21, 2014, p. 7.