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## Pakistan air force pounds North Waziristan, massacring scores of civilians

By Sampath Perera

25 January 2014

Pakistani military jets and helicopter gunships attacked several villages of North Waziristan agency on early Tuesday morning, killing at least 40 people. While the military claimed the targets were ‘militants,’ reports emerged from the area claimed scores of civilians were among the dead, including women and children. This was the first use of fighter jets in North Waziristan since 2007, when a ceasefire agreement was reached with tribal chiefs of the region.

According to the military, the operation’s purported target was Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP)—a grouping of several Islamic militias resisting the US-led NATO occupation of Afghanistan. However, media reports suggest that a major offensive against the TTP and allied groups may be in the offing.

Pakistan’s government is under constant pressure from Washington to launch an offensive in North Waziristan to take control of the area. The US government alleges that militants such as Haqqani Network have established safe havens there to launch attacks on its positions in Afghanistan. It has held Haqqani’s fighters responsible for several high-profile attacks in Kabul.

The agency is also a central focus of the illegal, CIA-run drone war in Pakistan. Thousands of men, women and children have already been killed by frequent drone strikes.

The military claimed TTP commanders and foreign fighters among those killed by its recent air strike. Areas of Mir Ali and Miran Shah—the two main towns in the agency, both close to the Afghan border—came under a sustained attack for several hours that destroyed houses and at least one mosque. Jets have also bombed targets in nearby Kurram agency.

Most of the casualties were civilians. A survivor who spoke with *Al Jazeera* said: “We had no idea what happened in the dark, and those who survived came out of their homes in desperation along with children and started walking away into the open.”

Media put the number of civilian casualties between 15 and 27. Following the attack, hundreds of families started to flee the area, fearing further offensives by the military.

The army has denied that the raid signalled a major offensive, claiming it was retaliation for attacks on it.

On Sunday, at least 26 soldiers were killed inside a military compound in Bannu, a major city in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa close to North Waziristan, when a bomb exploded. It is suspected that it was planted in a civilian vehicle rented to transport soldiers from the compound.

A day later, a TTP suicide bomber targeted the high-security zone surrounding army headquarters in Rawalpindi. The bomb blasted a checkpoint in walking distance from army headquarters—killing 13, including 8 security personnel.

Anonymous military officials told the *Dawn*, “This [air raid] hadn’t been planned before, and Pakistan Air Force jets were called to hit hideouts of the militants involved in attacks on security forces.”

Nevertheless, there is rising speculation of a coming military offensive, after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif cancelled his scheduled appearance at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. The announcement came after a TTP attack.

The military offensive Pakistan is contemplating would be part of a US campaign to crush opposition to its plans for keeping permanent military bases in Afghanistan after a so-called “withdrawal.” This policy aims to maintain US access to Central Asia, while carrying out its “pivot to Asia” against China. The policies of the Sharif government and the Pakistani ruling elite will escalate the bloodshed, while dragging the country behind the geopolitical maneuvers of US imperialism.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met with army chief of staff General Raheel Sharif and later chaired a “high level” meeting with military leaders to discuss the national security situation. While few details emerged, a spokesman of the Prime Minister’s office said issues of national importance came under discussion and that Sharif was appraised of ongoing military operations. “The meeting also considered possible action against terrorists,” *Dawn* added.

Security analyst and retired general Talat Masood told AFP that the recent attacks were “testing the patience of the military” and “extremely demoralising.”

“It is becoming so evident to people that the government is so ineffective and paralysed and has no policy or strategy, while the army’s hands are tied and it is being targeted and not being allowed to take action,” he added.

Masood is referring to the Sharif government's public position that it is committed to negotiations with TTP, a main part of its election agenda last May. Sharif is not a man of peace, however. He repeatedly insists that “eliminating terrorism”--by which he means aligning his policy on Washington's bogus “war on terrorism”--is at the top of his government’s agenda.

Mass opposition to the US war in Afghanistan and Pakistan forced his Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) to announce peace talks with TTP to end violence in the country, and to posture as an opponent of CIA drone attacks in Pakistan. However, it has already bowed to Washington’s insistence that the drone war must continue.

Sharif has called on Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the party led by Imran Khan whose supporters have blocked NATO supply routes into Afghanistan in protest against drone murders, to clear the routes. (See “Pakistani PM warns against anti-US drone protests”)

The TTP have rejected peace talks offered by the government, insisting it must first stop drone attacks, and vowed to increase violence in retaliation if not. Condemning the military offensive, the TTP spokesman Shahidullah Shahid threatened to carry out further attacks in capital Islamabad.

“If you people target innocent people in their homes, we will target you in your homes in Islamabad too,” he told Reuters.

The Sharif government approved a similar military offensive in Mir Ali last December that ultimately killed at least 70 people, including numerous civilians. Heavy weapons targeted houses and shops, and troops fired at civilians at close range.

The spread of civil war to much of the country is also bound up with escalating sectarian divisions inflamed by the unrestrained US intervention in the region. A bus transporting Shiites

pilgrims back from Iran was targeted by a bomb near Quetta in Balochistan, killing at least 22 and wounding another 20.

A schoolboy died this month when he prevented a suicide bomber from entering a school in a predominantly Shiite area.

Figures of Human Rights Watch show more than 400 Shiites were killed in 2013. Most of the attacks took place in Balochistan, where a sizeable Shiite and Christian minority populations live. Sunni fundamentalist groups allied with TTP were found to be behind most of these attacks.