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Pakistan, another bloody year?

By Alan Fisher in Islamabad

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In a country which is no stranger to death and destruction, for Pakistan 2009 was the bloodiest year on record.

According to figures compiled by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (Pips) there were 3,021 deaths in what it calls terrorist attacks last year, a leap of 48 per cent on the year before.

The bombing of the Ashura procession in Karachi on December 28 which killed more than 30, was the last of 87 suicide attacks in 2009.

These figures just reaffirm what most people thought they knew, Pakistan is one of the most dangerous places on earth.

Just across the border in Afghanistan, slightly more than 2,000 civilians were killed during the first ten months of the year according to the United Nations, while in Iraq, one leading advocacy group put the death toll at 4,500.

The Pips research is collated from observers on the ground, official sources and newspaper, magazine and television reports.

It reveals that there were 12,600 violent deaths across the country last year, with at least half of those being fighters caught up in the army offensives in South Waziristan and the Swat Valley or targeted by US drone strikes.

Civilian casualties

Many civilians were also caught up in these attacks.

Muhammed Amir Rana, the report's author, is softly spoken and genial, but he has a hard hitting message for the government.

"It does not have a comprehensive long-term strategy to address the problem, and is relying mainly on a firefighting approach," he says.

"Though the police were able to thwart many terrorist attacks in the country, scores of ferocious attacks targeting civilians and the security forces served as a reminder of the threat that the country faces."

And he warned that without a comprehensive, multi-layered short- and long-term strategy, the potential is that 2010 "may be as bad or even worse".

The Pakistan army's drive into South Waziristan was its second major offensive in 2009, which followed the operation in Swat and across Malakand.

It is always difficult to confirm battlefield casualties, but the army hailed both operations as a success, claiming they had killed many fighters in their battle against the Pakistani Taliban.

Human first

Tahira Abdullah is a veteran human rights campaigner.

She was arrested by the Pakistan government back in March and released after a few hours.

Addullah was also branded a CIA agent by the Taliban and attacked in her Islamabad home for her views and opinions.

Short, with her grey haired pulled back, she looks like a friendly school teacher. She has a readily laugh, but when she talks about the number of deaths outlined in the report, she gets angry.

"I am a Pakistani, but I was a human being before I was a Pakistani and these deaths are unacceptable," she says.

"It is wrong people are being killed by the Taliban, it is wrong that they are being killed in army offensives, and it is wrong that they are being killed by drone attacks.

"It's as if Pakistanis are expendable in the so-called 'War on Terror'. We are being used to fight someone else's proxy war."

2010 has already started badly, with more than 90 people killed in a Taliban suicide attack in Laki Marwat, a district next to South Waziristan on the first day of the New Year.

And with reports that the army is preparing a new offensive, this time in North Waziristan, this could be another bloody year.