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## Taliban on the run in Swat

By Syed Saleem Shahzad  
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ISLAMABAD - Following a barrage of American pressure, [Pakistan](#) abruptly abandoned all its existing plans to thwart insurgents and, in a televised speech by Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani, promptly declared all-out war against the Pakistani Taliban.

Within hours, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Pervez Ashfaq Kiani, launched an aggressive military operation - supported by gunship [helicopters](#), heavy artillery and fighters jets - into northern North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), ransacking Taliban sanctuaries in Swat and other areas. Interior Minister Rehman Malik told the BBC that an estimated 200 militants were killed over the weekend, bringing the total killed in fighting in the region to 700.

Water, electricity and lines of communications were completely cut; the Taliban had no option but to flee. An exodus of the local population also began, with hundreds of thousands of residents leaving their homes. In the most affected districts of Swat, Buner and Shangla, some 70% of the population has fled for their lives. The number may soar to 1.5 million in the weeks ahead.

Elsewhere, the government sponsored anti-Taliban conferences across the country in which Shi'ite and Sufi clerics declared the Taliban rebels heretics and called for their destruction. All four of Pakistan's major political parties - including the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party and the largest opposition party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz - released statements in support of the military strike.

This was how the situation unfolded over the past week in Pakistan - a situation envisioned by the administration of former United States president George W Bush more than two years ago. The events are a culmination of years of political deals cut with Islamabad to form a consensus government and provide popular support for [Washington's](#) "global war on terror".

But the essential question remains: will Pakistan win this American war against the Taliban? Neither Islamabad nor Washington has the answer, but both realize this will be a very long war. Even if the Taliban can be routed, the force and scope of the operation will undoubtedly pit different segments of society against each other.

This is the exact situation that al-Qaeda has been waiting for.

### On the ground

Seven years of war in Afghanistan have shown that no matter how much bad press the Taliban

receives, they are still the representatives of Pashtun tribal culture and nothing is going to change this.

Even as the new drama was unfolding in Islamabad, the Taliban issued warnings to all doctors in the NWFP that if they didn't abandon Western pants and shirts and begin wearing Pakistani *shalwar kameez*, or "proper clothing", they would be attacked by the Taliban.

The NWFP department of health responded by asking doctors to comply and don the Taliban's preferred attire. Despite the powerful military push, many officials still do not have the heart to resist the Taliban.

The military campaign is not universally popular in Islamabad, either. At a dinner held on Sunday at the elite Islamabad Club, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the former chief of the fundamentalist party Jamaat-e-Islami, lambasted Pakistan's Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Dr Babar Awan over the operation, claiming that it looked like a war against the people of Swat, not against the militants. Qazi Hussain Ahmed demanded to know why the plan was not approved by the parliament and the cabinet.

The federal minister initially avoided the answer and said that he respects Qazi Hussain Ahmed as a very senior politician. But when Qazi Hussain Ahmed continued his arguments, his patience ran out.

As witnessed by [Asia Times Online](#), Dr Babar Awan said: "Sir, have you seen the footages shown by some international TV channels about how a senior official of the administration was informing the Taliban to leave the places as the security forces are set to enter in Buner? Sir, we did discuss the issues in the closed-door sessions of parliament, but what can we do when our parliamentarians leak the information to the militants? Even a minister leaked very crucial information to the militants. Now, tell me what [other] option [was there] except unleashing the military operation secretly?"

Qazi Hussain Ahmed countered by saying the regional curfew should be relaxed so ordinary civilians could leave instead of being bombed or starved. Some believe that should the humanitarian crises worsen, it would justify direct American interventions deep inside Pakistan.

Influential US military minds, such as retired Colonel Douglas Macgregor, have been highlighting this possibility. Macgregor believes that the US should make Pakistan its focus rather than Afghanistan. But in Pakistan nobody is ready to accept this scenario. In fact, no Pakistani decision-maker could have foreseen that one day the entire world would consider the whole area of Afghanistan and Pakistan as the same conflict zone.

### **From the eyes of al-Qaeda**

The militants did not anticipate such a quick operation in the area and were caught completely unprepared. The numbers of casualties for the security forces are minimal. In most areas, either the militants are on the run or under siege by the security forces. In some cases, they are using the civilian population as human shields.

According to the local people, transporters have raised the bus [fares](#) for a single seat from 700 rupees (US\$8.70) to 7,000 rupees. People have left their belongings and homes abandoned as they fled to other cities for shelter. Such a mass exodus has not been seen in the region since the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in late 1970s.

Now, for financially battered Pakistan, the biggest challenge is the management of the refugees. So far, no political party has been seen in the affected areas. The only NGO, which is active for the relief operation is Al-Khidmat, a wing of the Islamic party, the Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan. The number of displaced people is likely to grow to as many as 1.5 million in coming days. The total funds the government has allocated so far is 200 million rupees (out of total 1 billion rupees announced by the prime minister). This means roughly 133 rupees for each person, hardly enough for one day's food.

The complaints have already started, and in the weeks ahead the situation is likely to get worse. As in the past, people may blame the government for the situation, not the Taliban.

Taliban may simply flee from Swat, as they did in late 2007, and regroup in different places to exploit the chaotic situation. Gaining several thousands of new recruits should not be a problem, especially

when they are lured by monthly stipends and other benefits. The Taliban can easily generate resources from robberies and ransoms. Within a few months, the Taliban will be able to raise new brigades of guerrillas.

With large numbers of people travelling to [destinations](#) like Islamabad and Lahore, ethnic tensions will flare up as people in Punjab are already wary of the Taliban and have started treating all Pashtuns with suspicion.

Amid the military strikes, an anti-Taliban religious segment is amplifying its grudge against the militants. When the Taliban regroup they are likely to strike back, killing their opponents as they have done in the past. If that happens, neither the Sufis nor Shi'ites will have much support - neither from their frightened constituencies nor from the military establishment.

This is the situation al-Qaeda has desired for a very long time. Al-Qaeda carried out sectarian attacks on Shi'ite mosques, allegedly assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, and bombed bombed public places. But they failed to rupture the national fibre of the country or create enough chaos in Pakistan to draw security forces to multiple fronts.

Now the government has done this for them. Islamabad has sponsored a military campaign that will push an isolated situation to the other parts of the country. The previous fear of the "Talibanization" of Pakistan could possibly become reality.