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Fleeing the battlefield

Taking on Islamist militants exacts a terrible human toll



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IMPATIENTLY awaited and enthusiastically cheered on by its American allies, the offensive by Pakistan's army against Taliban fighters in the Swat valley in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) is understandably less welcome to the thousands uprooted by the fighting. Many of those sheltering among the rows of white tents at Jalala camp in Takht Bhai, in Mardan district, think the operation was necessary. But there is also anger and mistrust, and many agree with Umer Rachman, a shopkeeper from Mingora, Swat's main city, that the army relies too much on mortars and air power, killing civilians. He himself had helped bury five, killed by shelling in the city centre, in a single grave.

A recent survey by the International Republican Institute, an American NGO, found that 69% of Pakistanis thought that al-Qaeda and the Taliban operating in Pakistan were "a serious problem",

and 45% supported the army's fight against them in NWFP and the tribal areas. That support, however, is fragile.

Like other camps built for refugees from Swat, Jalala has too few trees to offer more than sparse shade from the summer sun, and is full to capacity. But the stream of refugees from Swat, Buner and Dir is unrelenting. Many make the journey on foot, as lorry drivers are scared to transport them. Some new arrivals find the camp too crowded and move on to others in Swabi.

A senior military official claims about 800,000 civilians have fled the latest fighting. Relief agencies put the number between 240,000 and 400,000. They are joining about 500,000 displaced by earlier fighting in NWFP. However an official from a relief agency claims that the numbers of refugees have been exaggerated. Among the charities that have set up relief camps is Jamaat-ud-Dawa, an Islamic group that is in theory banned, as a front for the terrorists of Lashkar-e-Taiba.

The offensive began in earnest on May 8th, when Pakistani aircraft bombed Taliban positions in Swat. The previous day Yusuf Raza Gilani, the prime minister, had ordered the army to "eliminate" terrorists. The president, Asif Zardari, who was visiting Washington, vowed that the operation would last until "normalcy" had returned to Swat. The interior minister, Rehman Malik, then claimed that up to 700 Taliban militants had been killed in the fighting. A military spokesman said 29 soldiers had been killed and 77 wounded but could give no number for civilians killed. The army says 12,000 of its troops are pitted against 5,000 militants from a disparate mix of rival groups. It fears that if the Swat operation is not concluded quickly these groups may unite under the central leadership of al-Qaeda and the Taliban.



On May 12th elite commandos flew by helicopter into the Peochar valley, which runs north-west of the main valley, to conduct search-and-destroy operations in the area housing a local Taliban headquarters. An army spokesman claims the militants are on the run. But in Mingora the Taliban still rule the roost, standing eyeball to eyeball with soldiers holed up in government buildings. On May 10th the Taliban executed Zahid Khan, imam of the town's main mosque, because he had objected to their stockpiling arms and laying landmines.

It was only in February that the government called off a ham-fisted four-month operation in Swat, and signed a ceasefire agreement with associates of the local Taliban's most prominent leader, Mullah Fazalullah. Under the agreement, *sharia* law was to be adopted in Malakand

district, to which Swat belongs. But instead of laying down their arms in Swat, the Taliban took over the adjacent district of Buner.

The army has now taken them on. But it has still to show that it can hold the territory it conquers in Swat, let alone in the Taliban's heartland in the semi-autonomous tribal areas. Reports suggest that the army is planning a massive stepping-up of military operations against the Taliban there next month.

The most likely first target is the head of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, whose stronghold is in South Waziristan. The army has launched previous operations there. But Western critics claimed they were half-hearted and always ended in peace deals with militants. Now, however, General David Petraeus, the head of America's Central Command, has rightly asserted that there is a "degree of unanimity" among Pakistan's civilian and military leaders about the necessity of fighting the Taliban. Indeed, on May 12th members of the National Assembly, including the main conservative opposition party of Nawaz Sharif, backed the operation in Swat, though one religious party, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl, a government ally, protested.

Still sceptical over the Pakistani army's seriousness about eliminating the Taliban, Western analysts see its willingness to take on more powerful commanders as a gauge. One is Jalaluddin Haqqani, whose fighters battle Western forces in Afghanistan, and whom many senior Pakistani officers see as a useful asset through whom Pakistan can retain influence there. Tackling him would provoke a bloody backlash of suicide bombers. Another doubt is the durability of the government, a weak one led by an unpopular president in Mr Zardari. America is trying to bolster it by coaxing Mr Sharif into a power-sharing agreement. But, like previous American attempts to micromanage Pakistani politics, this one is probably doomed to fail.