

DAWN FRIDAY, JULY 9, 2004

Was the Wanaa operation necessary?

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IS the assassination of commander Nek Muhammad the end of the conflict in South Waziristan or the beginning of a wider insurgency, which may spread to other parts of Pakistan? This is a question which is to be seriously considered by those who hold the peace and security of the country dear to their hearts.

To answer this question one has to consider reasons for the military operation in one of the most sensitive and volatile regions of the country and its likely repercussions and probable fallout.

South Waziristan, being a remote tribal agency is not as well known as Khyber, Kurram or Mohmand agencies. However, during the British Raj Waziristan was one of the most troublesome and unruly places as its inhabitants never accepted foreign domination. In fact, one of the early expeditions undertaken by the British in Waziristan in 1852, under Major John Nicholson, was for the "chastisement of the most troublesome of the tribes". Between 1849, the year of the annexation of Punjab by the British, and 1937, fifty-eight expeditions were launched by the British in the tribal belt, of which the maximum number were in Waziristan.

During the British Raj, frequent offences committed by the tribesmen included the murder or kidnapping of a military or political officer, disruption of lines of communication, kidnapping of Hindu merchants for ransom or attacking cantonments. Reprisal depended on the gravity of the crime. Surrender of the culprits and a collective fine on the tribe to which they belonged were the usual demands.

If these demands were not met, the tribe was punished with the destruction of their houses, confiscation of their cattle and herds and a hefty collective fine. The tribesmen were often given 72 hours to vacate their area. The British avoided eliminating the tribal leaders as they wisely believed that they would be more dangerous dead than alive. After a punitive expedition, pacification would start immediately and soon there would be business as usual.

The current Wana saga has its origin in the events following the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York city in September 2001. This tragic event unhinged the already not so balanced American administration that was now looking for scapegoats to avenge its humiliation. The target chosen was Afghanistan; one of the most backward nations in terms of military capa-

with dire consequences if they did not withdraw their support from these "undesirable elements" the tribal chiefs made it clear that there were no foreigners in their area and the elements to whom the government was alluding were persons who had migrated to Waziristan during the Afghan jihad, settled in their area, married local women, had children from them and got completely assimilated in the local environment. Asking them to surrender to the government or leave a place that was now practically their home, was against their traditions and the code of Pushtunwali.

Unfortunately the government did not understand the deep sentiment behind this argument or did not want to understand it for obvious reasons. Consequently, a fierce military operation was launched in which houses were demolished, crops were destroyed and hundreds

contact with them on a daily basis for their numerous requirements. Asking them now to appear for an identification parade before the authorities was only to humiliate them and more so because this was not part of the agreement.

While the Shakai reconciliation was widely welcomed in Pakistan, shrill voices started coming from Washington, expressing displeasure over the deal. The top commander of US forces in Afghanistan, Lt General David Barno, declared that foreign fighters in Pakistan had to be "killed or captured" instead of being given amnesty by Islamabad. This was a clear indication of Washington's annoyance with the reconciliation at Shakai. The American forces in Afghanistan started crossing the border and indulged in search operations in border villages followed by violation of Pakistani air space. This was a clear message to Pakistan that if they did not take action in accordance with Gen Barno's warning, the Americans were prepared to take unilateral action.

This prompted the army spokesman in Islamabad to hint at another military action and the Frontier governor to publicly denouncing the tribal jirga for bad faith and wasting time — a very unfortunate statement by a person who should know the value and efficacy of this time-tested institution that had proved so effective at Shakai.

The month of May passed in relative peace but June saw the escalation of rhetoric and then physical attacks on each other's positions. While the insurgents freely used the relatively low-inten-

sity weapons — this was all they had; the army and the para military forces pressed into action all the deadliest weapons in their possession, including artillery. Soon after, the Air Force was also pressed into service using fighter planes and gunship helicopters. The tribal jirga that was negotiating a cease-fire and reconciliation was asked to stop its efforts and get out of the area. An economic blockade of the area was also enforced. It seemed that the final countdown had begun.

The curtain was drawn, at least for the time being, by the killing of commander Nek Muhammad and a few of his compatriots on June 19 as a result of a precision guided missile attack on the house of a tribal notable who had invited Nek and his friends for the evening meal. Two young sons of the host were also killed.

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became refugees in their own land. Seeing that this did not dampen the tribal resistance, the government reverted to the time-tested system of Jirga whereby the local Malikis and notables try for the resolution of the dispute which generally result in reconciliation and peace.

This is exactly what happened on April 24 at Shakai when the corps commander, Peshawar, and the so-called terrorists embraced one another and vowed never to resort to armed conflict again. The remarks of the corps commander on this occasion were significant. Before coming to Waziristan, he said, he was told that Shakai was a den of terrorists, but what he had seen has convinced him that it was mere propaganda.

The reconciliation at Shakai brought a sigh of relief to every Pakistani as they were greatly perturbed by the wanton killing and destruction in a region that badly needed the government's attention and care. The agreement arrived at Shakai was sig-

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The fact that some Afghans, Arabs and others had settled in Waziristan during and after the anti-Soviet jihad, was known to Pakistan and the US for a long time. But as these elements had never given any trouble, they were never bothered. But now that the Americans were in trouble in Afghanistan and did not want to admit their folly, they had to find a scapegoat; Waziristan was the perfect target. Hence, the Wana saga.

One thing is certain, however. What was done in Waziristan was not to protect some vital national interests of Pakistan. There was no insurgency. Government property was safe and government officials were living in peace and harmony with the local population. The tribesmen were engaged in their normal occupation of petty trade and commerce with other parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan as they had been doing for decades.

Notwithstanding this, the government, under American pressure, asked the Waziri tribesmen to surrender the foreigners living in their area. Threatened

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The reconciliation at Shakai brought a sigh of relief to every Pakistani as they were greatly perturbed by the wanton killing and destruction in a region that badly needed the government's attention and care. The agreement arrived at Shakai was significant as, besides ending hostilities, it also showed that the government could be magnanimous if it wanted to be. The agreement stipulated that the five wanted tribesmen and their associates would denounce militancy and would not participate in any terrorist activity; Pakistan's soil will not be used for any terrorist activity by anybody, and foreigners will have the right to live in an honourable manner.

As is evident, the agreement did not mention registration as a condition. Subsequently, the government issued a clarification to the effect that as all foreigners coming to Pakistan have to register themselves, this also applied to the foreigners living in Waziristan.

The point to ponder is that while the government is within its right to ask for the registration of all aliens entering Pakistan can this rule be applied to persons living in this country for decades with the tacit approval of the government, and who have never been asked for registration before. The point that Nek Mohammad made repeatedly during discussions with the authorities was that each one of these people was well known to the political authorities as they had been in

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The people of Waziristan have suffered tremendously in terms of both human life and destruction of their property. They fail to understand as to why are they being punished. They have done no harm to Pakistan which they consider their own home and for which they have sacrificed starting from the insurgency in Kashmir in 1947. They say that if the Americans and their surrogates in Afghanistan think that they are being attacked from Pakistani soil, then they should interdict the so-called terrorists and kill or capture them. They can then show the complicity of Pakistan and the tribesmen to the whole world. They have the means and the personnel to do it. Strangely enough, the Americans or the Afghans have, up to now, shown no credible evidence of the tribesmen's involvement in the insurgency on their side of the border.

One question that is to be answered is whether the registration of some individuals was so vital that in order to achieve it you had to bombard and destroy your own people.