

My bleeding Waziristan

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The military action in Waziristan, which began in September 2003, has been in operation for the last nine months with growing intensity and casualties. The land once known for its rough beauty and rugged terrain has turned into a bleeding wound with its innocent inhabitants being the ones to suffer the most. A large number of them have been forced to migrate to Tank, Dera Ismail Khan and adjacent areas. Their state is truly pitiable; to ensure their survival, they have had to vacate their homes and sell their valuables and property.

Their plight is due to the alteration in their status and in the way in which they are perceived by the outside world. Until a few years back, they were honoured as valiant sons of the soil for their heroic struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The Americans themselves, who are today baying for their blood, hailed them as heroes when they were taking on the common Communist foe. These are the same men whom US Secretary of State Alexander Haig, in September 1980 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, admired as "the true spirit of resistance, and freedom fighters against communist imperialism", and his successor, George Shultz, hailed as "the holy warriors fighting against the mighty Soviet forces for a cause with a mixture of bravado, courage and faith".

The conflict originated in South

Waziristan, but has now spilled over into the area of North Waziristan. The two agencies were raised to the status of administrative tribal districts or agencies as part of the Forward Policy of the British soon after the drawing of the Durand Line between 1896 and 1910. The total population of the South in 1988 was 429,841 compared to 309,454 in 1981 with an inter-censal growth rate of 39.2 per cent.

And in case of the North, the population was 361,246 compared to 238,910 in 1981 with an inter-censal growth rate of 51 per cent. The two agencies comprised an area of 6619 sq. km and 4707 sq. km respectively. The indigenous population, divided into tribes and sub-tribes of Mahsood, Wazir, Dawwar, Burki and Syeds, increased after 1979 due to the huge influx of Afghan refugees fleeing their homeland for asylum in Pakistan. Many of them, having established petty businesses and married in the area, settled there. Like all the FATA agencies, Waziristan falls adjacent to the Durand line.

The military action in Waziristan constitutes a shift in loyalties and priorities for the Pakistani establishment; it also symbolizes a redefining of the relationship between the centre and a periphery that has historically been almost completely independent of the centre's control. Following the events of September 11, 2001, and the subse-

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quent US campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan yet again became a frontline ally of the US. The present military operation against the tribals of Waziristan is a byproduct of Pakistan's altered relationship with the US. By operating as a foot soldier for the Americans, Pakistan is endangering its own national security and alienating its own citizens.

If the Musharraf government had not taken a U turn on its policies regarding the Taliban, the actions against the tribals would never have been taken. Due to its strategic location along the Durand Line, Waziristan became one of the foremost training areas and supply centres for the Afghan Mujahideen during the war against the Soviets. The tribemen accommodated the foreign fighters who had come from all over the world under the banner of *Pashtoonwali/Namawati* (hospitality

and asylum). In the wake of the Geneva Accords that brought the war to a conclusion and ensured the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, the importance of the fighters in the eyes of the US suffered a marked diminution and US financial, diplomatic and military support soon dried up.

The Mujahideen were abandoned by both Pakistan and the West. However, the tribal code of the residents of Pakistan's tribal areas forbade them from following suit. The Mujahideen remained ensconced in the tribal areas, where they had acquired significant interests, both through businesses as well as through marrying locals. The five years of Taliban rule strengthened their participation in the hope of an Islamic-led government that would cut across national borders and facilitate both Muslim unity as well as easier trade and commerce. It is an undeniable fact that the bulk of the support for the Taliban came from Pakistan.

The present war has been imposed on the tribemen without putting in place a time frame for the conclusion of hostilities or a conflict-resolution process. The tribemen, sensing the government's intention of launching operations, forwarded a time frame to negotiate the situation on the basis of discussions under the aegis of a tribal jirga. The jirga could have been

a successful option; certainly, it would have been a much safer option than the one being currently pursued. The tribal administration, since the days of the British, has been run under the policy of carrot-and-stick, through a blend of patient negotiations and community involvement (jirga).

The situation in Waziristan has become complex. In pursuit of Al Qaida terrorists, the military operation has resulted in significant human and material damage being inflicted on the tribemen. The Pakistan army, along with para-military troops and special troop contingents, is fighting along the roads and valleys of Waziristan supported by regular air force fighters. The American troops in Afghanistan, with the help of low-flying helicopters, are believed to have participated in the action, a factor not allowing the Al Qaida fighters a way out into Afghanistan. The actions pose military challenges to Pakistani troops with more demoralizing effects on soldiers as they target their own brethren with growing casualties.

The operation in Waziristan has transformed a way of life based on the tribal code of conduct and governance into lawlessness and retaliation. The village-to-village hunts, day-to-day operations, and reprisals have paralyzed routine life. Those familiar with its culture, history and scenic beauty perceive a gloomy future with immense human miseries and economic losses.

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