Pakistan reels und

By Syed Saleem Shahzad

'Winning the war, but also the peace, in Swat can only be achieved by minimising civilian suffering', says Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch

SINCE military operations began in the Swat area of this province just over a week ago, the Pakistani military claims to have captured the headquarters of the Taliban in Imam Dheri and killed more than 700 militants out of an estimated force of 7,000.

The assault of 15,000 troops with air support began after the collapse of a peace deal signed between the militants and the government in February after two years of fighting in the Swat area. Islamabad has ordered the battle to "eliminate" militants, branded by the United States as the greatest terror threat to the West.

On Wednesday, hundreds of commandos were dropped by helicopter into a mountainous Taliban stronghold in the Piochar region, about 64 kilometers from Mingora, the main city in the Swat Valley, as the military stepped up the offensive it claims has only resulted in the death of a handful of its troops.

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According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the figure of internally displaced persons stands at 800,600, and this is expected to rise to well over a million. Swat, 150 kilometers northeast of Peshawar, the capital of the NWFP, has a population of 1.8 million and has become a hotbed for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.

The crisis is unfolding to increased international alarm. Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari met with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown in London on Wednesday to discuss the military situation as well as aid to deal with the refugees. This followed a meeting between Zardari and US President Barack Obama in Washington.

The US House Committee on Appropriations has approved an interim US$1.9 billion of aid for counter-insurgency and economic and security support for Pakistan. The US Senate has also taken up a bill to triple American economic assistance to the country to $1.5 billion a year for the next five years.

Lawmakers have stressed that the money is not "a blank check" as the US will expect "tangible progress in governance" and that the money be used for combating the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The latest Pakistani offensive can be seen in this context.

On Wednesday, Ban Ki-moon, the secretary general of the United Nations, speaking after talks with Zardari, said the UN was prepared to lend assistance, but told the president "first and foremost to protect human lives during the military operation".

Pakistani authorities and international relief agencies are struggling to keep up with the flood of people - believed to be the worst in the country's history - pouring into the several camps that have sprung up.

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At Yar Hussain camp in Swabi, set up for displaced people from Buner, an angry law graduate named Imranullah told Asia Times Online, "The (military) operation is a sham and a fraud. It is a double game to get dollars from the Americans." He refused to admit that the military had harmed the militants.

"Helicopter gunfire killed a local chemistry teacher. The next day, his photograph was published in the newspapers and the army said he had been killed in a suicide attack. This is the way people are being killed, rather than the

der Swat offensive

Taliban," Imranullah said.

Imranullah's sentiments are echoed by the majority of the people in the camp, the biggest in the Swabi district with about 3,000 families - they blame the government's military operation for their fate.

"The military operation begun abruptly," Rahim Buksh, also from Buner, told Asia Times Online. "The sound of the helicopters and their gunfire created much terror, my children are still scared. Yesterday, when (opposition leader) Nawaz Sharif and the chief minister of NWFP visited the camp, their helicopter hovered in the skies and my six-year-old daughter was crying that the military had come again."

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The Yar Hussain camp is run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which handles water and sanitation, a kitchen for free food and an emergency school. In other areas, disputes have broken out, exacerbating the refugee problem.

In Kanda village of the Swabi district, the World Food Organisation established a food distribution point for refugees in coordination with a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), Peace and Social Welfare Department.

"Newly displaced people from Swat, Buner, Dir and Shangla are our priority," Mohammand Kamran of the NGO told Asia Times Online. "That's why we have to stop issuing coupons to refugees from Bajuar and Mohmand (tribal agencies)."

An estimated half a million people have been displaced by earlier operations in Bajaur and Mohmand. The government was in the process of arranging for them to return, but with the Swat operation these efforts have stopped as officials are overwhelmed trying to cope with the new influx.

The situation is compounded by the fact that local administration and provincial government ministers and leaders are not available on the ground due to the threat of the Taliban. This leaves the way open for Taliban propaganda against the government.

However, an official of the Pakistan Red Crescent Society, a retired colonel who gave his name as Nisar and who is in charge of the Shah Mansoor camp in Swabi, observed that community participation is immense.

"You can see that all the local tribal elders of Swabi are sitting with us. They wait to see what is required and then they quickly arrange it. I hope that through this community participation we will be able to cope with this crisis," Nisar told Asia Times Online.

It is natural that people respond to a humanitarian crisis. They did so in 2005 when a massive earthquake hit Pakistan-administered Kashmir, killing 79,000 and displacing many tens of thousands. The present crisis in NWFP is far bigger than that, given that the military operations are ongoing and there is no indication when they will end.

Displaced youths are left with two options. They can join hands with the Taliban, who will give them a small daily stipend, or they can go to big cities such as Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi.

In the southern port city of Karachi, however, the largest political force and a coalition partner in the government, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), has already warned of the danger of refugees.

"Pashtuns are our friends," a leader of the MQM, Waseem Akhtar, said on television. "As security guards they are the trustees of our properties and businesses. But we will never allow the Taliban to come to Karachi in the garb of refugees and will not allow people to encroach on our land and resources."

Soon after, riots between the native population and Pashtuns broke out in Karachi, the largest city in the country and also its financial center.

"It is a big dilemma that when Pakistan faces any big political crisis, it always comes with a social crisis. This was the situation in 1971 when Pakistan split and Bangladesh came into being," Khurshid Ahmed Nadeem, a prominent television anchor of Geo TV who hosts a talk show on ideological issues said to Asia Times Online in Islamabad.

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