

Issue Brief

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US-Pakistan Military Operations in Pak-Afghan Border

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The British knew it very well that interference with the tribal lands of the then undivided India bordering Afghanistan was risky; but, as always, the American policy makers have not read their history books well. They are forcing the Pakistan government to do exactly what the British avoided: conduct aggressive military operations in the wild tribal lands of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, kill tribals and demolish their homes in defiance of age-old customs and traditions.

The latest spell of Pakistani army operations in the tribal areas is taking place due to enormous pressure exerted by the US on Pakistan in the wake of unceasing attacks on US troops in Afghanistan from across the Pakistani border and the increased US grip on Pakistani army following the A Q Khan affair. Since 9/11 there have been four such operations in the tribal areas aimed at flushing out the Al Qaeda members. In October 2003, the Pakistani army had killed eight Al Qaeda suspects and arrested another 18 along the border with Afghanistan. In January this year, Pakistan government handed over a list to the tribals which contained names of 100 wanted terrorists. 60 of the 100 were caught and handed over to the military by the tribal elders. In late February this year, Pakistani forces captured 20 people in South Waziristan.

Since October last, Pakistan has moved some 70,000 troops to the tribal region. Reports say that around 12,000 military and paramilitary forces are deployed in South Waziristan alone.

The current operations have been inspired by the visit of CIA director George Tenet last month to Pakistan when the modus operandi of the US involvement in the ongoing operations was devised. The pressure will be kept up on the Musharraf regime by the forth-coming visits of US Secretary of State Colin Powell and the Chief of US Central Command, Gen. Abizaid.

US INVOLVEMENT IN THE OPERATIONS

Despite official denials the US is actively involved in the current military operations in FATA. Pakistani establishment had denied any US involvement in

the ongoing operations. However, addressing a tribal *Jirga* in Peshawar on March 15, President Musharraf admitted that a few Americans were operating in the area to gather intelligence. He said, "it is true that over two dozens of Americans are operating in the area who are sharing intelligence with the administration".

The Americans are more forthcoming on their involvement in the operations. On February 16 this year, Lt. Gen. David Barno of the US Army said the US and Pakistan were moving toward coordinated operations along the border adopting a "hammer and anvil" approach. The US has been shifting a lot of its 13,000 troops in Afghanistan to the Pakistani border and many of them are crossing into the tribal regions of Pakistan to conduct search operations along with the Pakistani Army. More and more spy planes and satellite monitoring facilities are being pressed into service along the Pak-Afghan border. U-2 planes and unmanned predator planes are also being allowed to fly over Pakistani territories along the border. Reports say that US has a logistical base on the Pakistani side of the border. Required equipments for this base are supplied from Pakistan's Shahbaz airbase by C-17 cargo planes.

UNPRECEDENTED OPERATIONS

Tribals in FATA have always been 'fiercely' independent. While some of them consider themselves to be part of Pakistan, others want a separate *pushtunistan*. There are seven tribal agencies in FATA and South Waziristan is the biggest agency

where Pakistani military is currently conducting the operations. Since Pushtuns are the sole inhabitants of FATA, they do have an affinity towards both the Taliban and the Pushtuns living across the border. FATA remains the uncivilized backyard of Pakistan and is the least developed region thereby giving rise to resentment and extremism among the people. While FATA is directly ruled by the federal government through the governor of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) appointed by the President of Pakistan, the tribals have always been allowed to continue with their age-old traditions and customs. Pakhtunwali is the code of Pushtun activities and it has been held sacred for generations. Successive Pakistani governments have allowed the Pushtuns of FATA to abide by their traditions and customs. It is this traditional independence of Pushtuns that the Pakistani government is trying to violate today through its military operations in tandem with the US forces. The Pakistani use of force under the various clauses of Frontier Crimes Regulation is thus facing stiff resistance from the Pushtuns.

EXCESSES IN FATA

On February 24 this year, Pakistani troops opened fire on a group of civilians in FATA after a rocket attack took place on a Pakistani military base. At least 14 civilians were killed and many were seriously injured. When tribals took to streets, the federal government ordered an inquiry into the incident but the tribals are skeptical about the outcome. Compensation to the tune of US\$ 1,700

for the killed and half that amount for those injured was subsequently announced.

The government has also imposed a fine of US\$ 94,290 on the Ahmedzai tribe in South Waziristan for the alleged attacks and ambushes on army and the paramilitary forces. The leaders of the Ahmedzai tribe say that the fine was unjustified and that they would not pay it.

Various clans of Zalikhel tribe are also asked to pay fines to the tune of US\$ 870 a day. They have been asked to hand over terrorists or get their homes demolished. Reports in November 2003 said the Pakistan Army detained a 10-year old boy belonging to Mehsud Abdulae tribe and asked the tribe to hand over some wanted criminals in return for the boy. Such strong-arm tactics of the Army is criticized widely.

TRIBAL REACTIONS

The ongoing military operations in FATA have infuriated the tribals on three counts: 1) the tribals have always felt alienated from the national mainstream. The current operations are only adding to this sentiment. Pakistan army has been traditionally dominated by the Punjabis and Pushtuns. However, since the US thinks, justifiably so, that Pushtuns are closer to extremist elements, they have asked Pakistan not to involve Pushtun officers in the ongoing operations. In fact, the recent past has seen more instances of Pushtun discrimination in the Pakistani Army. Reports say

that during the latest promotions in the Pakistan army, 18 brigadiers were promoted as Major Generals which included only one Pushtun. Increasing Pushtun resentment within the Army could upset the traditional unity within the Pakistani Army despite the fact that most of the Pushtun officers are city born and not from the tribal regions. 2) The wide-spread anti-Pushtun attacks and demolition of their homes along with heavy fines are making the tribes more resentful. 3) Allowing the US troops into the tribal regions has been a bone of contention between the Pakistan government and various tribes in FATA. The tribes have resented foreign interventions and the US presence in particular. This anti-foreign sentiment is being reinforced by fundamentalist forces like the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). 4) Tribals complain that they were not consulted by the federal government before launching the operation and the offensive was against the traditions and customs of the tribals. For the first time in its history, display of arms has been banned in FATA. The ban, many tribals think, hurt their pride as it was an unnecessary interference in their traditional affairs. They also think that the offensive was also an attack on their culture since they were forced to hand over those who had taken shelter with them.

VOICES OF DISSENT

On March 15 this year, tribal elders and religious leaders from most of the seven tribal agencies insistently refuted the presence of Taliban and Al Qaeda in FATA. The meeting was organized by the

leader of Khyber Union. The delegates warned that the ongoing operations could prove to be costly for the federal government. They also expressed their anger at the government's policy of banning Maulana Fazlur Rahman from attending the meeting in South Waziristan. While many people in NWFP and FATA consider the Pakistani support to the US as a betrayal of Islam's interest, some like Munawar Hasan, MMA's leader in NWFP and the central general secretary of the Jamaat-i-Islami, go to the extent of calling Taliban and Al Qaeda their brothers.

MMA's deputy Secretary General Liaquat Baloch has publically warned the federal government that allowing the US to conduct military operations in Pakistani territory will have adverse implications. MMA's anger has also been fuelled by the fact that though MMA is in power in FATA, it was not consulted before the army deployment there.

Important leaders like Senator Sanaullah Baloch of the Balochistan National Party, Maulana Sami-ul-Haqⁱⁱ, Senator Ibrahim Khan of Jamaat-e-Islami have publically condemned the US-Pak joint operations in FATA. One of the powerful tribal chiefs in FATA, Haji Malik Salaam Khan, alleged that the troops were killing innocents and demolishing homes of common people rendering them homeless. Saif Ali Haideri, president of All-FATA Supreme Council, said that the Pakistani Army is unnecessarily brutalizing the tribesmen. The recent meeting of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party

held in Miran Shah of North Waziristan asked the federal government to immediately stop demolishing homes of people on the basis of mere suspicions.

The token Rs. 7 million development pledge announced by President Musharraf in the wake of the widespread accusations from the tribals is unlikely to contain the rage. The Pakistan army has already lost more than 20 men in the ongoing operations without achieving anything very significant.

IMPLICATIONS

The already existing separatist tendencies in the tribal lands are bound to increase as a result of the anti-tribal policies of the federal government. Hurt ego, violated code of honor, resurgent Taliban, remnants of Al Qaeda, Pushtun fraternity in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the shared hatred for the US in the region will, in combination, increase the demands of separatism and elements of extremism in the region. The Pak government will find it difficult to contain increasing tribal violence. If not handled properly, tribal areas can prove to be an east Pakistan in the making. Moreover, if the fallouts of the ongoing operations are not contained sufficiently, the Pakistani establishment will be faced with the classic 'two-front' problem: India and the tribal regions.

The age-old and unsettled Pak-Afghan border conflict is likely to resurface with the US

involvement in the region. The Karzai government does not recognize the border agreement reached between the then Afghan ruler, Abdur Rahman Khan, the Amir of Afghanistan, and the British official Sir Henry Mortimer Durand in 1893. They say that the 100-year treaty expired in 1993 and it has to be renegotiated. Some Afghan officials even claim Pakistani cities like Quetta and Peshawar. Pakistan also knows that peace in Afghanistan and the Pak-Afghan border will bring back old issues like border resettlement and claims of *Pushtoonistan*. This explains why Pakistan does not want peace in Afghanistan, because a peaceful Afghanistan will invariably ask for a boundary settlement. The tripartite commission constituted to resolve the dispute includes the US and it would get involved more actively if things stand to get out of control in the region. Pakistani support to the Taliban is also aimed at preempting possible support the Afghans and tribals would get for their respective claims regarding the border and the Pushtun homeland.

Domestically, the ongoing operations would have three possible implications: 1) the increasing number of Army casualties in FATA will be an embarrassment to the government and the military. This embarrassment will increase when the general public starts considering the tribals killed during the operations as martyrs and the troops as aggressors. Moreover, there are elements within the Pak Army who support forces like the Taliban. In September 2003, Pakistani military purged some of its officers who had their familial roots in NWFP. In August 2003, Federal Bureau of Intelligence (FBI) of the

US arrested a Pakistani army Major and three of his subordinates in Afghanistan's Zabul province. In August 2003, three Pakistani army officers, including Assistant Adjutant-General and Quartermaster-General, Lt. Col. Khalid Abbassi and one Major Atta, were arrested in Pakistan on charges of helping Khalid Mohammed, Al Qaeda's Chief of Operations. President Musharraf does not enjoy full support of the Army all though he has the backing of the Corps Commanders. Musharraf's pro-US policies particularly that of permitting the US forces to operate within Pakistan against the tribals could stir up the Army. 2) The ruling coalition of Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Jamali also includes the six-party coalition of MMA that is opposed to the ongoing operations due to their fundamentalist nature and the strong support base in FATA. If the toll rises, there could be a possibility that the MMA might review its decision to support the Jamali government in Islamabad.

ⁱ As the name indicates FATA is administered directly by the central government. It is usually considered as a lawless territory and is inaccessible. There are seven tribal agencies in FATA six of which share border with Afghanistan making it convenient for the Taliban and AL Qaeda to hide among the fellow-Pushtuns and attack targets in Afghanistan. FATA shares some of its administrative officials with NWFP and the Governor of NWFP appointed by the President of Pakistan is also the administrative head of FATA. The local administration mostly consists of officials drawn from the region by the Governor of NWFP.

ⁱⁱ Maulana Sami-ul Haq, a former senator, heads the Jama Darul Uloom Haqqania which is located at Akora Khattak on the main Grand Trunk (GT) road between Rawalpindi and Peshawar. This seminary has been a training ground for several hundred Afghan Talibs (students) who went on to join the ranks of the Taliban militia in Afghanistan. The Afghan border lies a five-hour drive via Peshawar, the capital of the Frontier province.