

Pakistani army poised for new push into Swat

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Rashid Iqbal/European Pressphoto Agency

Residents of Mingora, in the Swat Valley of Pakistan, prepared to leave aboard buses on Tuesday.

Residents were flooding out of the Swat valley by the thousands on Tuesday as the government prepared to mount a new military operation against Taliban militants there after the collapse of a peace deal negotiated in February.

For weeks the Taliban have flaunted their disregard for the February peace accord, and two weeks ago they used the territory all but ceded to them under the deal to launch an offensive into another district, Buner, 60 miles from the capital.

This week the Taliban reversed the only achievement of the deal, a ceasefire in the Swat district capital, Mingora, which they seized control of Sunday, when their turbaned fighters laid siege to several police stations, a local lawyer and resident of the town said.

The Taliban's armed return to Mingora on Sunday signaled the final breakdown in the government's efforts to negotiate a peaceful solution to two years of fighting that has costs thousands of lives and damaged homes and livelihoods the length of the once-prosperous farming valley of Swat.

The Pakistani military, which is fighting to clear militants from two other districts of the North West Frontier Province, Dir and Buner, now appears ready to push its operations into Swat once again.

But the question remains whether the military has the will and capability to sustain its operations in three districts. The task in Swat remains hugely difficult, not least because the Taliban were digging in and mining the streets, according to residents, and the military had already failed to drive out the Taliban before it agreed to the February accord.

But public opinion in Pakistan toward the Taliban has undergone an important shift since the deal, and has now apparently given the military more confidence to move with full force against the Taliban.

A recent video showing the Taliban flogging a young woman as the militants clamped down their version of Islam law on Swat shocked the nation. The government has taken great pains to show its efforts to make the Swat peace deal work.

Finally, the Taliban incursion into Buner two weeks ago solidified a growing consensus that the Taliban had gone too far and that the military needed to stand up to the insurgents, and it has provided the catalyst for the military to act.

The media, politicians and even religious leaders are now speaking out against the extremist position of Maulana Sufi Muhammad, the main negotiator on the Swat deal, and Mullah Fazlullah, his son-in-law, who has links to the Qaeda-backed Taliban movement based in Pakistan's tribal areas.

Leaders of the Awami National Party, which governs the North West Frontier Province where all of the districts are located, still stand by the deal, which it says has been critical in winning people away from the militants and over to the side of the government.

The peace deal was popular among the people of Swat, who were desperate for peace and angered by the heavy-handed military campaign in the valley. But over the last three months of efforts to make the deal work, the Taliban have revealed that they have no intention of ending their insurgency. It has also become apparent that Maulana Muhammad is not able to control the militants, the politicians say.

There is no doubt that the military is fighting this campaign seriously, said Maulana Yousuf Shah, general secretary of the Jamiat-u-Ulama-i-Islam-S, a political party that is close to the Taliban and has helped negotiations between the two sides.

A Supreme Court lawyer Anees Jillani, who visited Swat recently, said the military remains divided and some have sympathy for the Islamists and are not willing to fight.

"When you ask them why are you not defeating them, they ask: 'Why should we?' and you ask about Sufi Muhammad, they say: 'What's wrong with him?'" he said.

On the ground, however, there has been a significant change in the military and paramilitary forces ranged against the Taliban.

Under the leadership of Maj. Gen. Tariq Khan, an energetic and determined commander, the Frontier Corps, the local Pashtun paramilitary force, has become better armed and equipped in recent months, with the help of the United States.

Supported by army units, it has proved itself better able to push back the Taliban, first in the tribal areas in Bajaur last year, and now in Buner, though at big cost to civilians caught up in the operations.

Anti-terrorist police units have also been deployed in the operations in some outlying districts, in police actions that are better suited to counterinsurgency operations.

Peshawar anti-terrorist police units have killed 88 suspected militants in the last four months, cracking down on the kidnapping and general lawlessness that were reaching right into the city, a senior police official said, asking not to be named because of the nature of his work.

"It is a manageable problem," he said, when asked whether Pakistan can contain the militant threat. "It does not take much to dishevel them," he said.

American support has been critical in the improvement of the Frontier Corps and the police are hoping for the same help, he said. "If Uncle Sam shows the same generosity to our force, I don't see why we cannot be a good supporting force," he said.

He said it was critical to have weapons and equipment that were better than those used by the militants.

"It's a bad situation, but certainly not a lost situation," he said. "It's not false bravado, I have seen the small dent we have made in this area. That has made them more hesitant of operating in this area."

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