

## Pakistan's Offensive Against Militants Is Right - but it needs to explain what it is doing

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By Ahmed Rashid

For the first time since 2009, a major offensive against Islamic militants in Pakistan's tribal areas has been launched with close coordination between the military and the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The military campaign in North Waziristan, one of the tribal regions where Pakistani and Afghan Taliban and a whole host of foreign jihadis have lived for years, started two weeks ago with a bombing campaign.

This week saw the start of a ground offensive, with troops going house to house in the regional capital of Miranshah. Some 30,000 members of Pakistan's military have been based in and around the city for years, but they never interfered with the activities of the militants who controlled at least half the town.

Such concessions are now over. According to the military, nearly 400 militants have been killed at the cost of 17 soldiers lives. Insurgent bases have been bombed and arms caches destroyed.

The army is also having to deal with a huge humanitarian crisis: some 470,000 people have fled North Waziristan for shelter in other areas of Pakistan and a further 75,000 people having crossed the border seeking food and water in Afghanistan's Khost province.

After wasting the past four months holding fruitless talks with the Taliban, the government is now galvanised in tightening up law and security. Both houses of parliament have passed a Protection of Pakistan Bill, which according to [Dawn newspaper](#) allows security forces to shoot suspected terrorists on sight with permission of senior officers. The bill's draconian measures, roundly condemned by human rights groups, is however a message to the army that after months of disagreements, the government is now fully backing this offensive. The administration has been hugely embarrassed by brazen attacks on the airports in [Karachi](#) and [Peshawar](#) which led to the suspension of several international flights to Pakistan.

General Raheel Sharif, the army chief since November who was ready to launch the offensive months ago, has the real power and has been proved right in long, contentious and paralyzing disputes with the government. But he has been careful to avoid appearing overly in charge or arrogant.

But there is widespread support for the action among most Pakistanis, many of whom [have like me](#) have been urging the army for months to destroy the militants who are threatening the country itself. Now what is needed is more transparency as to what is actually going on.

The media, human rights groups, local and foreign non-government organisations, and all United Nations agencies except for the World Food Programme are barred from the region by the army. Even Pakistan's own civilian disaster management and relief program has had no role to play. There is no information except what the army chooses to tell the public.

An even bigger issue of transparency looms. The military's spokesman has insisted that all terrorist groups are being targeted including those who have in the past been very close to the army and Inter-Services Intelligence arm, such as the notorious Haqqani network, a militant group, and other foreigners.

But what about numerous Pakistani groups such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, which have in the past been trained by the military and now have a growing presence amongst the Afghan Taliban. Moreover, many of the refugees fleeing North Waziristan tell stories of how the Taliban have escaped the offensive and run into Afghanistan.

The public is clearly supportive of the offensive and the army. A [poll published by the Pew Research Center](#) on July 1 found 66 per cent of Pakistanis see religious extremism as a threat to the country and 60 per cent view the Taliban unfavorably, while only 8 per cent support it. If such figures are correct, they reflect a huge turn round in public opinion.

In any case, much greater transparency is going to be needed so that Pakistanis and the world are convinced that this time the army and the government are serious. Pakistan needs zero tolerance for all kinds of terrorism and this may be the moment to start implementing it.