

## Pakistan focuses on Islamic extremism

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For years, the government and the army have not dealt with the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the tribal regions, but as the threat becomes clear, Islamabad will need international help.

By Ahmed Rashid

Writing From Mardan, Pakistan — Has the Pakistani government, after years of vacillation, finally gotten serious about eliminating the Taliban threat? Maybe.

For the first time since 9/11, Pakistan's army has begun a decisive military offensive to drive the Pakistani Taliban and other extremist groups out of South Waziristan, one of the seven tribal agencies that border Afghanistan.

This offensive follows a successful eight-week campaign to drive the Pakistani Taliban from the Swat Valley, where the army claims to have killed 1,500 militants and lost 134 officers and soldiers.

But it remains to be seen whether the government will be able to overturn the army's longtime support for the Taliban.

I recently interviewed dozens of refugees from the Swat fighting who have swamped this small town in the North-West Frontier Province. Many said they will not return home until the army has removed the Taliban there.

"We watched the army play games for two years, allowing the Taliban to take over the valley, allowing their radio stations to broadcast hate, allowing them to terrorize us," a man from Mingora in the Swat district, told me. "We will go back when the leaders of the Taliban are dead."

The Swat refugees are worried because the government is pressuring them to return home even though not a single Taliban leader was killed in the offensive -- they all managed to escape.

On June 15, Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, who leads the army, declared unequivocally that the Taliban chiefs were "not fighting for Islam" and "must be eliminated."

The army has now deployed in South Waziristan, where Baitullah Mehsud, head of the Pakistani Taliban's ruling council, along with Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders are believed to be hiding.

This is hopeful news. But the army will have to take a different path than in the past. Since 2005, the army and its intelligence services have periodically launched offensives against the Taliban along the Afghan border, only to pull back, holding talks and conducting cease-fires.

In the North-West Frontier Province, in the autonomous tribal agencies known as the Federal Administered Tribal Agencies, or FATA, the army has failed to protect pro-government tribal elders and chiefs. More than 300 were executed by the Taliban and Al Qaeda, while hundreds more fled the region with their families. Just recently, a tribal leader who had switched sides from the Taliban to the government was shot dead by the Taliban.

The disappearance of that traditional leadership, which supported Islamic moderation, tribal culture and the code of the Pashtuns, allowed the Taliban to extend its writ over the whole region. Protecting the population, especially those loyal to the government, is the very first lesson in counterinsurgency, but the army failed to apply it in FATA. It cannot afford to make the same mistake in South Waziristan.

The army's offensive in the FATA region is crucial to global security because the area is home to Al Qaeda and numerous allied groups. But it will not be easy. The rugged, mountainous region lacks infrastructure and is now in the

hands of the Taliban. The army's paramilitary troops have never won a decisive victory there.

This time, regular troops will be involved too, and U.S. forces on the Afghan side will provide a blocking force to prevent the Taliban from escaping into Afghanistan. But the Taliban and its allies are expected to create a distraction by opening new fronts in Punjab and intensifying suicide-bombing campaigns in Pakistani cities.

A key determiner of success will be the army's attitude toward the Afghan Taliban. After the Taliban was stripped of power in Afghanistan in 2001, the former military regime of President Pervez Musharraf gave refuge to the Afghan Taliban leadership and thousands of fighters. Using bases, recruitment and logistics in Pakistan, they revived their movement in Afghanistan in 2003 and today control much of southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Despite the presence of about 100,000 U.S. and NATO troops, Taliban attacks in Afghanistan have soared by 59% in the first five months of this year compared with the same period last year. In a single week in mid-June, there were more than 400 Taliban attacks -- the largest number ever.

Eliminating the Taliban threat will involve a battle of wills. If the U.S. or NATO falters at this critical juncture, it will be a signal for the Afghan population that the Taliban is winning and that Western forces want out.

In the end, though, it is Pakistan that must commit to eliminating Afghan Taliban leaders who continue living in Pakistan. Destroying their facilities in Pakistan, enforcing a cease-fire during the elections and pressuring them into talks with the Kabul government are just some of the steps that Islamabad can take.

For the army and the fragile civilian government of President Asif Zardari, international support is crucial. So is greater maturity by India, which must revive stalled peace talks with Pakistan on the disputed territory of Kashmir, because reducing the threat along the Indo-Pakistan border would allow Pakistani troops to more fully focus on the Taliban.

The Pakistani public, army and government have suddenly awakened to the Taliban threat. That is a crucial first step. But it will need strong international support to effectively respond.

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