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Pakistan's forgotten casualties of war

Thousands of civilians flee fighting between the military and the Taliban

By Omar Waraich
IN CHINGALAI, BUNER

SHAFIQ ULLAH vividly recalls the night he fled his home. "The helicopters came close over us, growing louder," the silver-bearded farmer says, in quick, panicked breaths. "I could see the bombs firing from cannons come down on the nearby houses. I saw one house destroyed completely. We waited at first, but then decided to leave. It was dangerous, but we had no choice. I was too afraid to stay there."

Clasping the hands of his children, Mr Ullah walked for two hours from his home in Ambela - the scene of some of the fiercest fighting between Pakistani forces and Taliban fighters - to the relative safety of a mosque in Goga village. Along the way, they encountered scenes that still haunt him. "It was awful. I saw pregnant women losing their babies, at least three of them. There were also ordinary people's dead bodies lying on the road, and dogs eating their flesh."

Mr Ullah is not alone. With the Pakistani military locked in a crucial battle against hundreds of Taliban fighters, tens of thousands of civilians are estimated to have fled the fighting. The militants have been emboldened by a truce that was struck with the Pakistani government in February, and have used their base in the Swat Valley as a staging ground for further incursions. When they reached the scenic valley of Buner, just 60 miles from Islamabad, the rest of the world sat up and took notice. But while President Asif Ali Zardari - who meets US President Barack Obama in Washington tomorrow - has resolved to push back against the Taliban advance, there are fears that the plight of a total of one million people now displaced by fighting across the North-west is being overlooked.

Among the displaced, there is little sympathy for the militants who seized Buner last month, looting properties, occupying marble factories, and barring women from public spaces as they sought to impose their own brutal brand of Islam on the area. But many residents complain that they were given no warning to leave the area before the military counter-offensive was launched. They accuse the army of damaging homes and inflicting mounting civilian casualties.

The village of Chingalal, on the edge of Buner, serves as a stopover before the refugees pile into trucks and are driven along a winding and bumpy road out of the valley to half a dozen camps where they will remain until the fighting is over. Wealthier residents of Buner have already fled to the homes of relatives, or distant cities. The very poor - simply cannot afford to leave. As harried-looking refugees arrive, locals hasten toward them with cups of water and an offer of food. Under a tin awning on the side of the dirt track, bags of rice and lentils are being prepared by volunteers. The conditions are squalid.



Pakistani women and children leave Buner after fighting between the military and the Taliban forced them from their homes REUTERS

Flies swarm in their dozens, and wild dogs scour the sides of the road.

"We need peace," says Jahangir Shah, a 20-year-old from Shamla village. "When the Taliban arrived in my village 15 days ago, they had guns with them. Sometimes they would go to the shops to buy food and mobile phone cards. They began digging trenches, telling people to pray, and preaching for the rule of Islam." All devout Muslims, he insists, want to live under Islam but he is scornful of the Taliban's claim that they came to Buner to deliver Islamic law. "This sharia issue is totally a drama," he said. "It was already as if we naturally followed sharia. No one watched television here, people prayed, women covered themselves. The Taliban has just used this sharia issue for their own interests."

Another man, Bashir Zada, edges into the conversation. "The Taliban came to my village, but they did not hurt us," he says. "There was just one inci-



dent where a boy was disturbing a young girl. She told the Taliban about this. So they dragged him out of a car, took him to the mosque and whipped him."

Mr Zada blames the army for breaking the peace, winning nods of agreement from some of those gathered. But that comment upsets Mr Shah. "The Taliban broke their agreement," he says. "They should never have entered

Buner." Yet he also has misgivings about the military's actions. "I myself have seen three houses destroyed by artillery fire. Cows and goats were killed. My sister and her two children are missing." Tomorrow, however, he will be joining the troops fighting the militants. "I am prepared to die for my country," he declares. "But people here are dying of thirst and hunger."

Between Chingalal and the refugee camps, there is no government relief operation. Instead, political parties and Muslim charities have stepped in to the vacuum. A steady flow of white pick-ups shuttling refugees is operated by Imran Khan's Justice party, with large portraits of the former cricketer turned politician emblazoned on the sides of the trucks. "It's a sure way of winning the hearts of our people, if not their votes," says Sajid Majeed of Nawagai village, before clambering aboard.

The refugees are first taken to a medical camp, half an hour's drive away, which has been set up by the Ummah Welfare Trust, a UK-based Islamic charity. There, volunteer doctors provide temporary shelter and health

check-ups. Common ailments include stomach flu and respiratory infections, caused by the whirling dust, but there are also many psychological problems.

After that the refugees are driven on to the town of Swabi, about 90 minutes from Islamabad, where basic supplies are being distributed. Each family from Buner is entitled to a 40kg bag of flour, from the World Food Programme, the government of Punjab or USAID. "A gift from the American people," reads a message printed in English on some of the bags. Ekmeem Khan, a refugee from Babaji Gandau, is not impressed. "There aren't enough rations for all of us," he says. "This is the result of the war between the Taliban and the government. We poor people are stuck in the middle."

Both Karzai and Zardari are weak and unable to control their own countries" Leading article, page 26

Stakes at US summit could not be higher

WorldFocus Pakistan

Andrew Buncombe



WHEN ASIF Ali Zardari sees Barack Obama at the White House tomorrow for what is expected to be a tense meeting, the stakes could scarcely be higher.

Pakistanis had grown used to headlines writing off their country as a "nation on the brink". They would read them, dismiss them with a sigh and get on with their lives. But with Taliban fighters moving ever closer to Islamabad and efforts to broker a ceasefire in tatters, many Pakistanis are now publicly despairing about their country's fate.

So what's brought about the shift? First there was the harrowing video purporting to show militants in Swat flogging a teenage girl. Then Taliban fighters seized control of Buner, a strategically important valley just 60 miles from the capital. Finally, there were the comments from Sufi Muhammad - the cleric supposed to be brokering peace between the militants and the government - describing institutions including parliament as un-Islamic.

The evidence of spreading Talibanisation was sufficiently disturbing to kick-start Mr Zardari's government and the military into action. They launched an offensive to drive the militants from Buner. Meanwhile, 6,000 troops diverted to the Indian border have moved back to the North-west. "The national mood is changing," one Pak-

istani official admitted. "People got scared, which is good."

In Washington, there remains deep unease about the ability of Mr Zardari to confront extremists who may control up to 12 per cent of Pakistan, and whether the US should be pouring in more money with little accountability. The US is set to deliver \$7.5bn to Islamabad during the next five years and up to \$1.5bn within the next few weeks. While officials are heartened by the new offensive, Mr Obama recently described Pakistan's situation as a "grave concern" and there are said to be new anxieties over the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

"No one is optimistic," said Christine Fair, a Washington-based analyst. "What we need from Zardari is some real leadership; to be someone who will stand up and say we are fighting for the future of our country, rather than trying to blame the US for the problems." Mr Zardari, who regularly points out that his widow, Benazir Bhutto, was killed by militants, could respond by pointing

"The national mood is changing. People got scared, which is good"

PAKISTANI OFFICIAL SPEAKING ON CONDITION OF ANONYMITY

out that US insistence on launching missile strikes against suspected militants is unpopular and counter-productive.

Faced with few alternatives, the Obama administration will probably conclude the meeting by voicing support for Mr Zardari. At the same time it has also been reaching out to his rival, Nawaz Sharif. Officials said the pair have been urged to work together, but Washington may also be developing a "Plan B".

Mr Zardari is one of two visitors to be briefed on Mr Obama's AffPak policy. The other is Afghan leader Hamid Karzai, a man whose inability to exert control outside Kabul makes Mr Zardari appear like a positive strongman. Mr Obama had hoped to bring stability to Afghanistan by exerting control through Pakistan. Instead, the current focus is simply on helping a civilian government in Pakistan survive. For once, the views of a deeply concerned Washington and a despairing Pakistani public may actually chime.



Asif Ali Zardari will meet Barack Obama in Washington tomorrow



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