

Anti-Terrorist Security Sweep In Pakistan Winding Down

By Abubaker Saddique | March 31, 2004

Pakistan's government on March 30 began pulling troops out of South Waziristan following a 12-day security sweep of the area to root out Taliban and al Qaeda militants. The withdrawal was accompanied by an official admission that no Islamic radical leaders had been killed during the operation, as was earlier claimed.

According to military sources, over 60 Islamic militants and 46 government troops were killed during the South Waziristan security sweep. Approximately 160 militants were also taken prisoner.

On March 29, Maj. Gen. Shaukat Sultan, the chief spokesman for the Pakistani military, announced that the operation had succeeded in killing al Qaeda's chief of intelligence, an individual identified only as Abdullah. Sultan added that the "No. 10" leader of al Qaeda, Tahir Yuldashev, who is also the political leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, had been seriously wounded, but had escaped a military dragnet.

Sultan went on to describe the security sweep as a success. The "relatively high casualties was a small price for the lofty cause of eliminating terrorism from Pakistani territory," the general said at a Foreign Ministry news conference.

On March 30, Sultan was forced to make an embarrassing revision of the previous day's assertion, saying that Abdullah was not a member of the al Qaeda hierarchy, but instead a relatively minor operative in the terrorist organization. While the military was downgrading its profile in South Waziristan, which straddles the Pakistani frontier with Afghanistan, Sultan indicated that troops would maintain a presence in the region until it was completely "purged" of foreign militants.

Islamic political parties in Pakistan strongly resent the operation. The six-party Islamist coalition—the United Council for Action, which runs the provincial government in North West Frontier Province (NWFP)—on March 26 staged a coordinated protest action against the security sweep.

Some Pakistani political observers questioned the government's contention that the mission was a success, pointing to the fact that a relatively tiny number of Islamic militants were either captured or killed. At the same time, the militants' stiff resistance appeared to demoralize Pakistani troops. The most notorious incident of the entire operation occurred March 26, when militants executed eight government soldiers who had earlier been taken hostage.

On March 25, a videotaped statement broadcast by the Arabic language network Al-Jazeera, showed al Qaeda #2 leader Ayman al Zawahiri calling on Pakistan's predominantly Muslim population to rise up against Gen. Pervez Musharraf's government. "Every Muslim in Pakistan must do his or her best in getting rid of this government, which cooperates with the enemies," al Zawahiri said on the tape.

The Pakistani crackdown in South Waziristan is viewed as one component of a broader U.S.-Pakistani joint effort to contain the resurgence of Taliban militant activity inside Afghanistan. The South Waziristan operation underscored that Taliban and al Qaeda elements had used the region as a safe haven.

The United States in recent weeks has beefed up its military forces in Afghanistan, especially in Paktia, Khost, and Paktika provinces, along the Pakistani border. These troops were reportedly in position to trap Islamic militants who tried to cross the border to evade the pressure coming from Pakistani forces on the other side of the frontier.

(Abubaker Saddique reports on South Central Asia for Eurasianet (www.eurasianet.org). This was reprinted with permission by Foreign Policy in Focus (www.fpiif.org.)



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