

FASCISM IN ACTION

Amal Rana

In the last several months, reports have been pouring in about the constant missile attacks in Pakistan by US drones. The Pakistani government continues to unconvincingly voice nominal protests to the US while simultaneously demonstrating its eagerness to continue to be an ally in the 'war on terror'.

Recently, the President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari suggested that the US provide Pakistan with its own predator aircraft. Zardari has already begun making overtures to the newly elected Obama government.

What is missing in the news headlines about predators targeting "Islamic militants" is the enormous and horrific impact of US imperialism and aggression on the innocent civilians many of them women and children in Bajaur, Waziristan, and other areas of Pakistan as well as Afghanistan.

Several thousands of innocent civilians have been killed, injured and displaced within Pakistan. Upto 500,000 people have been internally displaced and many are without shelter or water.

In areas such as Baluchistan, Pakistani military aggression has led to the displacement of innocent civilians who are receiving little or no support from the Pakistani government or the international community. Little or no aid seems to be forthcoming—a stark and damning contrast to the approximately \$12 billion in aid that the Pakistani military has received from the US since 2001.

Pakistan's eagerness to illustrate its active role in the 'war on terror' has resulted in other tragic consequences for the people of that country. Since Pakistan became an ally in the war on terror, thousands of civilians—including journalists, human rights and labour activists—have been the victims of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Extraordinary renditions from Pakistan have resulted in many innocent Pakistani civilians being held for years in Guantanamo Bay and Bagram.

It was the cases of these disappeared people—some of them women and children—that the deposed Chief Justice was about to bring to trial when he was removed from office and emergency was declared in Pakistan.

The mass mobilization of the Pakistani people in protest against these actions is still being celebrated as one of them most extraordinary moments in the history of the country. The women of Pakistan were visibly at the forefront of this mobilization and their courageous resistance continues to be a source of inspiration and a catalyst for lasting and substantive change within the country.

Sadly, the demands to restore the Chief Justice have still not been met and the establishment of an Independent Judiciary does not seem to be a priority for the government.

Most disturbingly, the government recently appointed two new ministers to the cabinet who are clearly anti-women. This sends a clear message to women and defenders of basic human rights in Pakistan about the government's stance on these issues. State sanctioned violence against women is a reality in Pakistan

and has been justified by patriarchal and problematic interpretations of cultural traditions and religion.

IDPS

The plight of tens of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from conflict hit Bajaur, on the country's western border with Afghanistan, has begun to attract increasing local and international attention.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said in a statement on 14 October that some 190,000 people had been displaced from the area since fighting started there in mid-August.

Of these, about 168,000 Pakistanis are now shielding in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and above 20,000 Pakistanis and Afghans have fled into eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province, the UNHCR said.

Most of the IDPs are staying with host families on one side of the border or the other, the UNHCR said, noting that their teams could not access most of these areas for security reasons, and relied on government estimates.

The UNHCR has made arrangements to house up to 60,000 IDPs at the Kacha Garhi camp in Peshawar, capital of the NWFP, which until earlier this year had housed refugees from Afghanistan.

It has also sought US \$ 17 million in international aid for IDPs from other northern areas, where a fierce battle is continuing between government troops and Taliban militants.

Essentials such as water are often not available at makeshift camps for the displaced.

TOUGH CONDITIONS

"Life is tough here. We still lack a proper tent. Food supplies are erratic, water is limited and it is too hot," said Mohammad Arif, 40, who—with his wife and five children all under 10—moved to the Kacha Garhi camp a week ago.

There are currently around 200 families at Kacha Garhi, according to camp officials. Most come from the Charmang, Loy Sam, Rashakai and Khar areas of Bajaur. More come in everyday.

Other IDPs from Bajaur are housed in makeshift camps in the NWFP just outside Bajaur. The conditions they live in are often grim.

"I sometimes think it would be better to die in Bajaur than live like this," said Mohsin Ahmed, at a camp in Mardan in the NWFP, sitting outside a tattered tent in which he, his parents and three other family members were attempting to shelter. Many others face similar situations.

Iqbal Haider, co-chairperson of the autonomous Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), said : "Even now, far too little is being done for these people". Some officials, however, say awareness of the plight of the IDPs is increasing.

The head of NWFP's health service, Sajid Shaheen, said : "We have directed all hospitals to ensure special assistance to these people on a humanistarian basis," and he confirmed a drive had begun, in cooperation with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), to vaccinate about 4,000 children from displaced families against childhood diseases.

The plight of 80,000 or so people displaced in Balochistan is forgotten, say rights groups.

The involvement of international and local aid agencies in the effort to help the IDPs from conflict-hit areas in the north means their plight should improve at least to some degree. However, the same cannot be said of other IDPs in Pakistan.

They include the 80,000 or so people displaced—mainly in late 2005 and 2006—by conflict in the Dera Bugti and Kohlu areas of the vast, southwestern province of Balochistan, where nationalist fighters clashed at the time with the Pakistan military.

Unrest continues to simmer, say analysts. Baloch community leaders have repeatedly called for international humanitarian groups to assist these persons, many of whom live in makeshift camps in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, or other cities.

"I can say with authority that far too little is being done by the international community or groups within Pakistan for displaced people. We have pointed out their situation many times, but these displaced people are the victims of negligence and indifference," the HRCP's Haider said.

"The displaced people of Balochistan have completely forgotten and are in a very poor situation," Haider said.

The Pakistan government has acknowledged that the displacements from Bajaur are the biggest in the country's history, and there are fears the situation could get worse. □□□