

Pakistanis, displaced by bombings, endure hardships

Kathy Kelly | Jun. 25, 2009



In early June, 2009, I was in the Shah Mansoor displaced persons camp in Pakistan, listening to one resident detail the carnage which had spurred his and his family's flight there a mere 15 days earlier. Their city, Mingora, had come under massive aerial bombardment. He recalled harried efforts to bury corpses found on the roadside even as he and his neighbors tried to organize their families to flee the area.

"They were killing us in that way, there," my friend said. Then, gesturing to the rows of tents stretching as far as the eye could see, he added, "Now, in this way, here."

The people in the tent encampment suffered very harsh conditions. They were sleeping on the ground without mats, they lacked water for bathing, the tents were unbearably hot, and they had no idea whether their homes and shops in Mingora were still standing. But, the suffering they faced had only just begun.

UN humanitarian envoy Abdul Aziz Arrukban warned on June 22nd that the millions of Pakistanis displaced during the military's offensive against the Swat Valley would "die slowly" unless the international community started taking notice of the "unprecedented" scope of the crisis. (Jason Ditz, Anti-War.com)

UN agencies and NGOs such as Islamic Relief and Relief International report that many of the persons now living in tent encampments, or squatting in abandoned buildings, or crowded into schools designated as refugee centers, may soon start dying from preventable disease.

Health teams note increasingly frequent cases of diarrhea, scabies and malaria, all deadly in these circumstances, especially for young children. With so many people living so close to each other, these diseases are spreading fast.

Relief groups are concerned that as the monsoon season approaches, in July, these problems will get considerably worse. Monsoons bring regional floods and cause escalating rates of malaria and waterborne diseases. The impact, this year, is expected to be much more severe because so many people are living in crowded and unsanitary conditions.

Pakistan's already rundown health care system, officials report, is now near collapse. Hospitals in northern Pakistan have been overwhelmed, with exhausted doctors, depleted medicine supplies and avalanches of red tape blocking money and medicine for the crisis.

Writing for the Associated Press on June 7th, Kathy Gannon described the men's ward in the Mardan District

Hospital: 30 steel beds lie crammed together, with two-inch mattresses and no pillows. Pools of urine spread on the floor, and fresh blood stains the ripped bedding. The one bathroom for 30 patients stinks of urine and faeces. The toilets are overflowing, the door to one cement cubicle is falling off and a two-inch river of urine covers the cement floor. In one corner, garbage is piled high.

The annual budget for health care in Pakistan, this year, is less than \$150 million, while Pakistan's defense budget last year came to \$3.45 billion, and is expected to reach \$3.65 billion next year.

People in Shah Mansoor worry that the international community as well as their own government won't notice the health care crisis they face. But villagers yet to flee their homes in Waziristan agonize under constant military scrutiny from lethally-armed U.S. surveillance drones.

A villager who survived a drone attack in North Waziristan explained that even the children, at play, were acutely conscious of drones flying overhead. After a drone attack, survivors trying to bring injured victims to a hospital were dumbfounded when a driver stopped, learned of their plight and then sped away. Then it dawned on them that the driver was afraid the drone would still be prowling overhead and that he might be targeted for associating with victims of the attack.

The U.S. drone aircraft can see Pakistan - their pilots in air-conditioned Nevada trailers see the terrain even though they are physically thousands of miles away.

Writing about U.S. Air Force efforts to meet the voracious need for unmanned aircraft surveillance in combat zones, Grace Jean notes, in the June, 2009 issue of National Defense Magazine, that the Air Force's 432nd Air Expeditionary Wing, at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, is expanding base operations. "We have 34 video feeds over the battlefield right now," says Col. John Montgomery, the wing's vice commander. When operating a drone, Montgomery says, "You are part of the battlefield." Commenting on the hundreds of combat sorties he flew over Sadr City, in Baghdad, Montgomery said he even knew where people hung out the laundry and when they took out the trash. "I knew the traffic flow for the hours that I could see, and when that changed, I knew it. Once you know the patterns of life, when things are different or odd, that means something's up, and that gives the battlefield commander, the joint commander on the ground, a heads up."

On Tuesday, June 23rd, U.S. drones launched an attack on a compound in South Waziristan. Locals rushed to the scene to rescue survivors. The U.S. drone then launched more missiles at them, leaving a total of 13 dead. The next day, local people were involved in a funeral procession when the U.S. struck again. Reuters reported that 70 of the mourners were killed.

Drone operators and their commanders at Creech Air Force Base will become increasingly well informed about the movements of Pakistani people, but meanwhile the U.S. people will have lost sight of war's human costs in Pakistan.

Now, we're hearing of imminent army operations in South Waziristan that have already forced about 45,000 people to flee the region, joining about two million men, women, and children displaced by fighting in the Swat Valley and other areas. People from Waziristan who flee from their villages, trying to save their lives, trying not to be seen by the omnipresent drones, will likely join the unseen, the displaced people whose lives and hopes escape international notice as they die slowly.

President Obama has taken us into an expansion of Bush's war on terror, presumably guided by the rationale that his administration is responsible to root out Al Qaeda terrorists. But the methods used by U.S. and Pakistani military forces, expelling millions of people from their homes, failing to provide food and shelter for those who are displaced, and using overwhelmingly superior weapon technology to attack innocent civilians, -- these methods will continue creating terrorist resisters, not defeating them.

If we want to counter Al-Qaeda, if we want to be safe from further terrorist attacks, we'd do well to remember that even when we don't recognize the humanity of people bearing the brunt of our wars, these very people have eyes to see and ears to hear. They must be asking themselves, who are the terrorists?

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