

Continuing War

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Pakistan is at war. The entire country is the battleground. The series of bomb blasts gained momentum as expected, in the run-up to Oct 17 when the army launched its ground offensive in South Waziristan. During the first two weeks of October, militant attacks killed over 150 people, including some 40 on a deadly Thursday in Lahore, Kohat and Peshawar.

“These strikes seem to say to security forces the more you come after us, the more we’ll go after you,” commented a BBC reporter in Lahore.

There isn’t much option. Many among even those who on principle oppose military intervention say the military action should have started much earlier—in conjunction with a well-thought out political and development strategy. It didn’t because then self-styled ‘Chief Executive’ and later ‘President’ Musharraf wanted to hunt with the hounds and run with the hares.

His U-turn from Pakistan’s traditional pro-jihadi, anti-India policy under American pressure following the attacks of ‘9/11’ did not include a crackdown on ‘home grown’ outfits like the Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, patronised by Pakistani intelligence agencies to keep the fire smouldering in Indian-administered Kashmir (remember, Musharraf was the architect of the disastrous Kargil war which proved so costly in human and material terms and raised global alarm bells due to Pakistan and India’s nuclear-armed status).

Militant attacks in Pakistan gained intensity as it became clear that the government elected in the February 2008 polls would not follow Musharraf’s dual policy. For the first time, a Pakistani government has acknowledged that ‘India is not the enemy’ and has rejected the use of religiously motivated violence.

The nation is paying a heavy price for this resolve : over 8,000 people have been killed so far this year, compared to nearly 200 in 2003. The over 22,000 people killed since include over 2,500 security personnel, 7,000 civilians and 5,900 insurgents (figures compiled by the South Asia Terrorism Portal—<http://www.satp.org/>).

Bereft of official patronage and under attack by the army, militant groups are retaliating with a vengeance—the Afghan Taliban, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (a grouping of tribal factions along the Afghan border), the international Al Qaeda and the ‘home-grown’ militants. They are not a homogeneous entity, but they share the same ideology supposedly based in Islam but actually rooted in the drive for political power. It includes a desire to keep women out of the public sphere, prevent anyone from having any fun, and using vigilante actions to punish perceived moral transgressions.

Funny, that sounds like Pakistan under the Gen. Zia ul Haq, or his friends and masters, Saudi Arabia—or the ‘Saffron Brigade’ of India. Not so funny, when one considers Big Brother America’s links with Zia and the Saudis. Pakistan fought the first Afghan war at America’s behest. The CIA cynically used religion to turn that war of national liberation into a ‘holy war’. That wheel has come full circle.

Dr Eqbal Ahmad in his prescient talk “Terrorism, theirs and ours” (University of Colorado, Boulder, 12 October 1998,) noted the distinction between the ‘Greater Jihad’ which involves the struggles with self and the promotion of the ‘Lesser Jihad’ which involves violence. This distinction was blurred as ‘jihad’, which had disappeared as an international violent phenomenon in the last four hundred years “was revived suddenly with American help in the 1980s” after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. “The US saw a God-sent opportunity to mobilize one billion Muslims against what Reagan called the Evil Empire... CIA agents starting going all over the Muslim world recruiting people to fight in the great jihad. Bin Laden was one of the early prize recruits...”

Dr Ahmad had predicted this coming home of the chickens to roost. There are no short cuts to winning this war—which is no longer America’s war alone but Pakistan’s too. Pakistan needs international and domestic support for this, not only for their own sake, but for peace everywhere.□□□