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Pakistan: People of Buner at mercy of Taleban

Nearly 650,000 Pakistanis living in Buner district, some 120 kilometres from Islamabad, are now at the mercy of abusive and repressive Pakistani Taleban groups that have taken over the area since 21 April, Amnesty International said from Pakistan today. Buner's takeover follows the Taleban's assumption of power in the neighbouring Swat valley.

“The Pakistani government is fiddling as the North West Frontier Province burns,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific director, in Islamabad. “The government has not given any sense of how it intends to protect the rights of hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis who are now subject to the repressive rule of the Taleban, just in the shadow of the capital.”

Buner residents told Amnesty International researchers in Pakistan that 400 to 500 heavily- armed Taleban now roam freely throughout the district.. For the past two days, the Taleban have established a checkpoint on the main road entering Buner, at Babaji Khandao, at which they check every vehicle and target anyone working with non-governmental organizations.

Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International that local police - widely described as poorly- armed, under-paid, and untrained - in Buner remained in their barracks and did not challenge the Taleban’s takeover. Yesterday, two platoons of Frontier Constabulary troops moved in to Buner to provide reinforcement to the one existing platoon and resume patrolling, but they have not stopped the Taleban’s movement and activities. Several people, including journalists and NGO workers, told Amnesty International that the local population was terrified that the Pakistani army would launch retaliatory operations in Buner.

“Amnesty International has documented serious harm to civilians as a result of indiscriminate army operations in the past. Such operations have been a primary reason for the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people,” Zarifi said. “The people of Buner are desperate for government support, but they don’t want another inconclusive army operation that destroys what it can’t protect.”

The Taleban commander in Buner, Mufti Bashir Ahmed, known as Abu Sultan, through his spokesman, Mullah Khalil (also known as Abu Usman and Mufti Ghreeb), has prohibited all actions that violate the Taleban’s harsh and restrictive interpretation of Islamic law. The Taleban have banned music, ordered all girls over the age of seven to wear a burqa, and all men to grow beards.

Local NGO staff told Amnesty International that Mullah Khalil has also targeted NGOs and warned against any action that could be construed as cooperating with the United States of America.

Over the past two days, Taleban have forcibly taken at least 23 vehicles belonging to NGOs and government officials, including local health facilities and security officials. They have also ransacked the offices of several NGOs, including Pakistani groups such as Paiman, involved in health education and hygiene to primary schools, Rahbar, working on poverty alleviation, as well as projects associated with international groups such as ActionAid and the International Medical Corps.

“Important development work has now stopped or been severely curtailed in many parts of NWFP,” Zarifi said. “A population suffering from poor health care and low literacy now receives even less crucial assistance.”

The Taleban have closed down the shrine of Pir Baba, a poet and Sufi saint. They have also burned down houses surrounding the shrine of Rana Chandar Gi, a Hindu saint, at Elum Mountain, but the shrine itself was not harmed and remains open.

Members of the small Sikh and Hindu communities living in Buner told Amnesty International that the Taleban have not targeted them, but that many of their members are preparing to leave out of fear of a significant deterioration in the situation.

“The Taleban in Buner are establishing themselves as the ruling authority instead of the Pakistani government, just as we’ve seen in several other areas they have taken over,” Zarifi said. “The people of Buner are now at their mercy, particularly women and girls, whose rights the Taleban systematically deny.”

“Any response has to focus on the well-being of the people of Buner and other areas now affected by the Pakistani Taleban. For too long have the Pakistani government, and its international backers, chiefly the US, dealt with this problem purely as a military or counter- terrorism issue, instead of demonstrating that their chief intention is protecting the rights of the people who are most directly affected.”

Background:

Buner’s takeover comes ten days after the Pakistani government agreed to a “peace deal” with Pakistani Taleban groups in Malakand division, which includes Swat district as well Buner. Malakand is a settled area, formerly one of Pakistan’s most popular tourist destinations. The area’s residents have overwhelmingly voted for secular, liberal candidates in elections in the past year.

Under the terms of the agreement, signed into law by Pakistani President Zardari on 14 April, the Taleban would be able to assert their version of Sharia law (Nizam-e Adl) in place of Pakistani law. In exchange, the Taleban were to lay down their arms and avoid attacks on government installations.

Some 40 to 50 Taleban moved into Buner on Thursday, 9 April, after the announcement of the peace deal” in Swat. At that time, the elders of Buner gathered the local militia, known as a Lashkar, against the Taleban to stop them and with assistance from the police pushed the Taleban back to Swat, as they had done on at least one previous occasion. The Lashkar’s leaders were Fateh Khan of Fateh village and Mukarrum Khan of Ragga village. According to witnesses, in that clash 3 policemen and 2 militiamen from the Lashkar died, along with about 12 to 18 injuries.

After the resistance from the local Lashkar, local tribal elders convened a peace council or jirga, led by Khurshid Akbar of Buner town, which succeeded in getting the Taleban to stop their activities in Buner.