

Testimony before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs

Assessing the IDP Crisis of Pakistan

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Mr. Chairman, I would sincerely like to thank you for holding the hearing this morning aimed at calling attention to the humanitarian situation of internally displaced people in Pakistan. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the subcommittee on the compelling situation of internal refugees and to comment on measures the United States could take with the Pakistani government to advance our mutual interests.

Mr. Chairman, a great deal of international attention is riveted on the plight of the one million plus refugees who were driven from their homes in Malakand Division last April. These refugees fled to avoid getting caught in the crossfire as the Pakistani Army moved into the region to restore the writ of government.

There are two other groups of internal refugees who add to the swollen numbers of people victimized by extremist actions. An estimated 500,000 people left the Swat Valley region last year to escape the persecution of extremists affiliated with the TNSM. Often called "Taliban" in our media, TNSM extremists, led by Maulana Fazlullah and supported by his father-in-law Sufi Muhammed, openly targeted and terrorized anyone who resisted their harsh code of behavior and repressive rule including the Army, police, civil servants, and even little girls attending schools.

Fighting between the Pakistan Army and Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud in northern Waziristan drove a third group of several tens of thousands of refugees from their homes over a year ago. Substantial numbers have not yet found it safe enough to return home. All three waves of internal refugees are victims of extremist violence. All three groups need assistance from their government and international donors to provide security, rebuild communities, and reclaim lost livelihoods.

Mr. Chairman, as the United States engages with the Government of Pakistan to assist civilian victims of terrorism, we must also be mindful that we are facing a common enemy. The militant fighters, who declared war on the Pakistan government as the "near enemy", also attack the United States and western interests as the "far enemy." While the Pakistan Army is making concerted progress toward routing the Taliban in Malakand, the threat in Waziristan, FATA and indeed, deep inside Pakistan's cities is still quite worrisome. Our immediate priority is to assist Islamabad to rebuild the Malakand Division so that the refugees can return in safety and dignity. At the same time, we must also prepare for the eventuality that other large groups of civilians in the future may have to flee extremist violence elsewhere in Pakistan.

Mr. Chairman, there are a number of developments regarding the situation in the Swat Valley and Malakand Division that are positive.

For the first time this last May the Pakistani public, security forces, and civilian political and religious leaders united against extremist groups and ideology that threatened the idea of Pakistan as a moderate, democratic state. Nearly all political parties joined the All Parties Conference in mid May in support of the Army's push into Swat. A week later religious leaders led by cleric Sarfaraz Naeemi held a national conference and declared suicide bombings and beheadings to be un-Islamic. When extremists assassinated Sarfaraz Naeemi two weeks later, the overwhelming majority of Pakistan's public condemned the Taliban. A sea change in public opinion moved against extremist Taliban, as confirmed by the recent Worldopinion poll.

A second point of optimism is that the Pakistan Army showed resolve in its operation against the Taliban in Malakand. Tamping down doubts that the Army would not move against the Taliban, the Army deployed 15,000 troops. Militant fighters were hit hard and dispersed quickly. People are now returning.

Thirdly, the government understands the critical need to provide security for the people of Malakand and that local police play a unique role for domestic security. Islamabad has taken several landmark moves to augment local police by establishing a plan to engage retired Army sergeants and doubling police salaries that had been dismally low. The police augmentation has not yet been deployed. Cost and implementation difficulties are obstacles. Again, the United States should make police training a priority in its aid programs to Pakistan. A point that I cannot emphasize enough is that a surge in police is necessary but it should also be accompanied by an immediate deployment of judges and courts. The returning population must feel protected by all aspects of their government. A fourth point is that rapid re-construction of infrastructure damaged by military shelling is vital for recovery and to solidify public confidence in the government. In many ways, the speed of recovery will define the success of the operation against the extremists. A great deal of work must be done, but some early reports are that rebuilding will be less difficult in the SWAT Valley than in other conflict areas like Afghanistan or even FATA. The SWAT Valley stands out in Pakistan for having a large middle class, high literacy rate, and relatively developed infrastructure.

A final advantage as the people of the Malakand Division begin to return to their homes is that the United States is generously and swiftly preparing to provide substantial aid to rebuild. Secretary Hillary Clinton and Ambassador Richard Holbrooke have announced an additional \$165 million in aid for immediate refugee and reconstruction needs. It is important that US reconstruction teams be permitted to assess the damage so that American aid can quickly assist returning refugees. If U.S. and other international aid are used effectively, and there is no reason to think otherwise, the aid could have a stimulus impact on the local economy. However, there are a number of other issues that continue to raise concern.

Security is still inadequate. The Pakistan Army hit the extremists hard, but there are credible reports that Taliban remnants have regrouped and are again targeting civilians, particularly those they believe

supported the government. The military objective of establishing a “cleared zone” may not necessarily mean it is a “safe zone” for returning families. It is, therefore, encouraging that the Pakistani Army has understood the need to remain in the region for many months to assure security and is talking about maintaining semi-permanent cantonments. Talk has not turned into a concrete plan and our government can help by providing protective gear and specialized equipment for the military in those areas.

Related to the need for continued military presence is the requirement for an augmented community police force in anticipation of an uptick in crime as refugees return to the conflict areas. The local Pushtoon culture in the Malakand Division has a tradition of reprisals against perceived injustices to family members. Once people return, we could expect to see an upsurge in retaliatory violence against individuals and family members believed to be involved in the conflict. The government may want to consider programs to encourage reconciliation.

A final concern is the likelihood that the conflict will have launched social forces that will permanently change the society and culture of the Swat Valley. The Pakistan people and government demonstrated solidarity in its action to prevent the spread of extremism, but there has been no public dialogue about the future of the region. The Swat Valley is well regarded as a favorite vacation spot for Pakistanis. It is also known for its feudal system, only recently integrated into the federal Pakistani state. Mr. Chairman, the Taliban have been very shrewd in winning support by exploiting local peasant resentment of a feudal system. If the government action is not more than reestablishing the status quo, little has been accomplished. Mr. Chairman, Pakistanis ought to engage in a serious dialogue on the future of feudalism in modern times. The issue of land reform has long been considered a “no go subject” within government circles dominated by elite landowners. The Taliban have demonstrated that the appeal of land reform to impoverished people is a powerful political motivator.

I doubt the status quo is even a possibility. Many land owners who for centuries were at the center of administrative and judicial traditions, will not find it safe enough to return anytime soon. Targeted and terrorized by the extremists over the past year, tens of thousands had already moved their families from the region long before the April military operations. It is important that the government move swiftly to provide a responsive administrative and judicial system to fill a vacuum created by the breakdown of traditional mechanisms to resolve disputes. It goes without saying that failure to do so will provide an opening for the extremists who have proved adept in exploiting not only the people’s resentment of feudalism, but also the modern state’s inability to provide an efficient, just judicial system.

A final word on permanent social disruption – There is a real possibility that the poorest of the poor may never return to their homes in the Malakand Division. Beyond the stipend of about \$300 provided by the government to refugee households, many of the poor do not have the means to return to their homes. They own nothing, and have no incentive to return. Some analysts speculate that many poor will remain in the districts and communities where they fled, thereby adding to the social burden of other affected areas in Pakistan. U.S. aid programs must consider aid projects throughout these regions as well.

Mr. Chairman, as the committee requested, I would like to conclude with a few recommendations for the United States as it aims to ameliorate the suffering of Pakistan's internally displaced. My remarks will be addressed to the three Ds that Secretary Clinton has identified -- development, diplomacy and defense.

Mr. Chairman, as an American citizen and one who understands the importance of our good relations with the Pakistani people, I am proud of the swift and generous support the Congress and our government have provided to meet the critical needs of destitute civilians displaced by war.

Most of this aid is channeled through Non-Government-Organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations who are committed to working under dangerous conditions to help the needy.

My recommendation is that we find a way to make the generosity of the American people more visible to the Pakistani public.

Our recent experience during the 2005 earthquake relief operations proved that the Pakistani public is genuinely appreciative of American humanitarian and development aid. Favorable opinion of the U.S. more than doubled immediately after the earthquake emergency, greatly aided by then President Musharraf who stood before the Pakistani media and called US helicopters "angels of mercy." Mr. Chairman, I agree with the position of InterAction, (an umbrella group of American NGOs), that U.S. aid should not be delivered with the purpose of "winning hearts and minds." Aid rarely wins people over in military scenarios; and, importantly, "winning hearts and minds" for political purposes distracts from our central mission of administering to those in need.

However, Mr. Chairman, I strongly believe that our government's humanitarian and development aid projects should have an American face. Our people should work directly with those we are assisting. Yes, it is very risky for Americans to work in the field in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan. For this reasons only humanitarian volunteers should be asked to deploy in particularly dangerous areas. Far too many times, even volunteers are prevented from directly serving the neediest by our government, and in this scenario, by the host government. The point I would like to make is that we should have an informed dialogue on the levels of acceptable risk for our aid workers. US officials are asked to stay behind compound walls when the aim is to help people in distress. There is a very large community of Pakistani-Americans who could help. Many are eager to serve both their country of nationality and the country of ethnic origin.

Mr. Chairman, just as a large bulk of our funding for the internal refugees in Pakistan is delivered by United Nations Agencies and is not visible as aid from the people of the United States, another chunk of our aid passes through Pakistani government ministries. I understand the value of using our aid to build the human and organizational capacity of federal ministries to manage projects. On the other hand, I also believe the Pakistani public would feel reassured if they saw more American citizens on the ground distributing aid directly to the needy.

Mr. Chairman, turning to the second D of diplomacy, I believe Ambassador Holbrooke and Ambassador Anne Patterson are extremely effective representatives and are both highly regarded by the people of

Pakistan. The paradox is that while the U.S. is doing more than any other nation to help the refugees and support the government's campaign against unpopular Taliban, the United States is still deeply distrusted.

The World Opinion Poll conducted in May of this year reported that a very large majority of Pakistanis are united in supporting Army operations against the Taliban, are overwhelmingly against a Taliban regime ruling Pakistan, and reject Al Qaeda bases on Pakistani soil. Yet, at the same time, the same polls also found large majorities holding an unfavorable view of the current U.S. government.

The most persuasive explanation for this disconnect is that the historical "trust deficit" between our two governments and people is still quite pervasive. I believe the trust deficit is the single biggest obstacle to both our nations attaining our goal – the goal we share – of guaranteeing a stable, prosperous, democratic Pakistan. Effective public diplomacy can play a role in closing the trust gap.

Pakistan has a vibrant and free press that has enormous influence over the population of 170 million. We saw the power of the Pakistani media in the swift reversal of public opinion in April after the media broadcast the savagery of so-called Taliban justice. Our public diplomacy could do more to address the disconnect between public rejection of the Taliban and public distrust of the one international partner who is doing the most to help Pakistan resist this extremist threat. We should carry our message directly to the Pakistani people through direct engagement with their own media and minimize coverage as part of our meetings with high ranking officials.

Finally, on the third D of defense -- a consistent element of the trust deficit is the stubborn view in Pakistan that the United States is a fickle ally. Most of the population believes we use Pakistan when it suits us and readily abandon our friend when we have achieved our objectives. They believe we will do so again by pulling up stakes in Afghanistan. A substantial element, although not all, of Pakistan's establishment believes there is an Israeli/Indian/American collusion to squeeze Pakistan from its eastern and western borders, break up the state, and seize its nuclear weapons.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the United States and Pakistan are fighting a common enemy in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. We seek the same outcome – a stable prosperous and democratic Pakistan.

My recommendation, Mr. Chairman is that the United States speaks with one clear voice. Our consistent message is that we are joined with the Pakistanis against a common enemy. The Taliban and Al Qaeda are dead-end movements that threaten their people and state and force people to flee their homes. Our unfaltering message is that we will stay in Afghanistan until the extremist Taliban threat there is spent, however long it takes. Those within the Pakistani establishment that still cling to historic relations with Taliban as a hedge on the day the U.S. will leave the region must understand that that day will not come. We wish to work with a Pakistan ally that understands the value of our partnership and supports our joint efforts to defeat extremist who aim to bring down the government in Islamabad and do harm to the far enemy in the west.