



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

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Rising Numbers of Victims of Fighting and Terrorism in Pakistan in 2009

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According to latest reports the victims of terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 2009 outnumbered the civilian casualties in Afghanistan in the same period. If this tendency continues, it might deepen the Pakistani public's resentment of the U.S. and its allies.

According to January report by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), an independent security research organization, in 2009 Pakistan suffered the highest number of civilian and military casualties since the escalation of violence triggered in that country by the destabilizing War on Terror waged in the neighboring Afghanistan since 2001. In 2009 3021 people died in terrorist attacks and the total casualty count from the internal fighting (civilians, Pakistani soldiers, and rebels) exceeded 12 thousand – a 48% increase in militancy-related fatalities on 2008. As much as one-third of the victims died as a result of suicide bomb attacks, which shows that the rising incidence trend of this type of attacks noted since 2007 is a sustained trend.

In 2009 the Pakistani military ran two major offensives against the Pakistani Taliban and their Al-Qaeda allies, in the Swat Valley and in South Waziristan. These operations increased the number of casualties among the Pakistani troops and the rebels, relative to 2008. The growing number of terrorist attacks is a response to the military's stepped-up activity – a form of retaliation for military operations, the Taliban say. However, in 2009 the terrorists changed their tactic and, rather than aim mainly for military targets (barracks, convoys, military bases), they focused on civilian targets (mosques, open markets, sport events) to maximize fatalities. The October 2009 attack on a Peshawar bazaar, the 2009's largest strike which took a toll of more than 120 lives, was of precisely that nature. Even so, a majority of the population supports the military's operation against the Pakistani Taliban, but they resent the U.S.'s unmanned-aircraft strikes against the rebels which in 2009 killed no less than 100 civilians.

An analogous January 2010 report from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) on the protection of civilians in armed conflict in Afghanistan gives the number of civilian victims in 2009 as 2412 – which is also the highest count since the beginning of the war in 2001. Of these casualties, 67% are attributed to attacks by anti-government forces and 25 % to the forces supporting the Afghan government.

The two reports differ as to subject matter (the PIPS report is concerned with overall security in Pakistan, while the UNAMA document deals with the protection of civilians in Afghanistan), but their findings are comparable to some extent. Put together, they show that Pakistan's 2009 totals of killed and wounded in internal fighting (25.5 thousand) and in terrorist attacks at home are higher than the respective figures for Afghanistan – even though it is Afghanistan that is the main theater of the international forces' war against al-Qaeda and terrorists.

The leaders of Pakistani Taliban have currently taken shelter in Pakistan's tribal areas where no armed operations are conducted by government security forces. Regardless of whether this situation continues or whether the Pakistani army opens a new front, a large casualty toll is to be expected in 2010. This tendency will be reinforcing the Pakistanis' belief that they are bearing the main burden of the costs of the war on terrorism, just as it will keep fuelling the Pakistani public's resentment of the United States and, by extension, of their allies (at present barely 16% Pakistanis have a positive opinion of the U.S.). This could also make the Pakistani authorities even more reluctant to continue cooperation with the U.S. and its allies without a suitable compensation, whereupon the U.S. administration might shift its interest away the ISAF mission as a strictly Afghanistan-related project.