

Pakistani Army faces a well-trained foe

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LOE SAM, Pakistan*

When Major Ijaz Hussain and nearly 150 soldiers were dispatched to recapture this strategic junction from the Taliban in Pakistan's tribal belt this August, they had little idea what they were in for.

With scarce ammunition and little water in fierce heat, they fought the Taliban in close combat, but were quickly surrounded. Two convoys sent to rescue them were decimated by the enemy. Ordered to retreat, the survivors escaped under cover of night through maize fields in sloshing rain, evading Taliban pursuers and gunfire from government helicopters.

Three months after that debacle, the Pakistani Army finally controls Loe Sam in the Bajaur area of the tribal belt. But the Taliban lurk on the edges of the ruined village and their sniper fire echoes along the 12-kilometer, or eight-mile, road that leads here.

What began as a simple incursion has now become the most sustained campaign by the Pakistani Army against the Taliban and its Qaeda backers since Pakistan allied itself with the United States in 2001.

The struggle for Bajaur is one of the biggest battles against the militants on either side of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. President-elect Barack Obama has pledged to make the conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan a top priority. The Bajaur campaign serves as a cautionary tale of the formidable challenge that even a full-scale military effort faces in flushing the Taliban and Al Qaeda from rugged northern Pakistan. Officials here describe the area as the keystone of an arch of militancy that stretches across the semi-autonomous tribal regions and into Pakistan proper.

The Pakistani Army sent 2,400 troops here in early September to take on a Taliban force that has now drawn militants from across the region, as well as a flow of fighters from Afghanistan.

Like all Pakistani soldiers, the troops sent here were trained and indoctrinated to fight in conventional warfare against India, considered the nation's permanent enemy; they were barely trained in counterinsurgency strategy and tactics.

To save Loe Sam, the army has destroyed it. The military arranged for a two-day visit for foreign journalists to Khar, the capital of Bajaur, and to Loe Sam to show what the military describes as its resolve in routing the Taliban.

The shops and homes of the 7,000 people who lived here are a heap of gray rubble, blown to bits by the army. Scraps of bedding and broken electric fans lie strewn in the dirt. As army helicopters and artillery barrages targeted militant strongholds around the junction, people fled across the border to Afghanistan or are among the estimated 200,000 displaced living in tent camps or with relatives in their own country.

The scorched-earth campaign has been necessary, military officials said, to root out a well-armed and well-entrenched Taliban force, whose tactics and sophistication were underestimated from the moment Hussain and his men first arrived.

The army and the Frontier Corps, the paramilitary force responsible for security in the tribal areas, say they have suffered 83 deaths and 300 wounded soldiers since early August. That compares with 61 dead for coalition forces in all of Afghanistan in the first four months of 2008.

At some point, probably over a period of several years but no official could explain exactly when, the militants dug a series of well-engineered, interconnecting tunnels behind the mud-walled family compounds lining the road from Khar to Loe Sam.

The military now believes such tunnels lace much of Bajaur where the militants still control large swathes of territory, said General Tariq Khan, commander of the Frontier Corps and leader of this campaign. Along the route to Loe Sam, the army had dropped 500-pound bombs to break the tunnels apart. Some of them are a

kilometer long and deep enough to store caches of weapons, Kahn said.

Many of them were constructed as escape routes to dry river beds. Some were built with respiratory systems so that fighters could stay there for long stretches.

"These were not for ordinary battle," Kahn said in an interview in his headquarters in Peshawar, the provincial capital of the North West Frontier Province.

The militants seized on Bajaur some time ago because of its strategic location beside Kunar Province in Afghanistan, where U.S. and coalition forces are fighting the Taliban.

The area serves as a gateway to Kunar for Taliban fighters from other parts of the tribal belt, particularly Waziristan, to attack U.S. forces. Bajaur provides access south to Peshawar, one of the nation's major cities that is under threat from the Taliban. And it offers a land bridge to more settled parts of Pakistan, like the Swat Valley to the east, where the army also is struggling to contain the Taliban.

The fight is now a test of the strength between the army and Tehrik-i-Taliban, the umbrella group of Pakistani Taliban, which is allied to al Qaeda, Khan said.

The army will fight until it has captured all of Bajaur, Khan said. "Provided they maintain momentum," he said, the army expects to show significant gains by mid-November.

Arabs, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Afghans form the hard core of their opponents. They enlist young local men who join the militants for money and the prestige of sitting with a rifle in a pickup.

U.S. officials have said they believe some important Qaeda leaders are dug into Bajaur. In 2006, an American missile attack by a pilotless aircraft on the village of Damadola was aimed at killing the deputy to Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

It was in response to the 2006 strike that the Taliban started taking over Bajaur, said the government's senior civilian official in Bajaur, Shafirullah Khan.

Their methods were ruthless. Home owners were coerced or paid to allow the Taliban to use their premises as bases, Khan said. Those who resisted were killed, often by beheading.

A well-known Afghan fighter, Ziar ur Rehman, directed and fortified the operation with his own men, bringing hundreds of fighters from Afghanistan last November, Khan said.

By December, the Taliban had pushed government-armed local tribesmen, known as levees, out of their checkpoint at Loe Sam. By June, the Taliban had destroyed more than half the 72 checkpoints in Bajaur.

"We thought the people in Loe Sam would come out and support the levees," Khan said. "But they did not. The locals were scared."

The Taliban disrupted the workings of the civilian government, staging a suicide bomb attack against a truck carrying the salaries for teachers and robbing a major bank, he said.

But it took the fall of Loe Sam itself and Hussain's failed effort to retake it on Aug. 6 to wake up the government and the army to just how strong the militants had become.

Interviews with army officers, and a ride under army escort along the road from Khar to Loe Sam, revealed that even now the soldiers were, in many instances, unprepared to fight a fast-moving, highly motivated and well-disguised insurgent force.

"One of the basic problems of our fighting system is the intelligence failures," said Khan. "Aggressive patrolling should have been done. It wasn't done."

Khan and other military officials complained that they did not have the proper weapons and equipment to

take on the militants, including radar and real-time intelligence. The Taliban, meanwhile, had heavy weapons and communications systems that could disguise their whereabouts, as well as the ability to home in on army radios.

Lieutenant Colonel Javed Baluch and his soldiers were first dispatched to Bajaur in early September. Even the terrain surprised them. The khaki colored earth dipped and swerved every 25 meters; crevices suddenly became hillocks, scattered clumps of trees and bushes concealed snipers. The militants were king because the civilians had been ordered out of the area by the army in early August, in anticipation of the fight.

"The enemy had a lot of advantage," Baluch said. "They knew the area completely. We were told we would meet foreign fighters and local fighters supporting them. The resistance unfolded differently."

His mission was to clear Taang Khatta, a place thick with the mud-walled compounds occupied by the militants. It was a spot where the Frontier Corps forces had faced stiff resistance in August.

On the first day his soldiers advanced along the road on foot to Taang Khatta, they were ambushed, he said. The insurgents were invisible, hidden behind the thick mud walls of the compounds, their snipers' rifles poking through narrow slits.

"Small arms have no effect on the walls, and that's what we were carrying," Baluch said. "We did not know where to fire back."

In the end, it took five days and the loss of four men to conquer Taang Khatta, a mere bend in the road, just up the road from the Khar headquarters.

Still, he was lucky, he said. The push to capture another tiny place, Nisarabad, farther up the road, left 12 soldiers dead and 46 wounded.

The final assault on Loe Sam was led by Major Anwar Saeed, 37, who was experienced in fighting the Taliban in North Waziristan, the center of the most hardened fighters in the tribal belt.

It was finally captured on Oct. 21, and destroyed in the process.

The army officer in charge of the operation at the Khar headquarters, Colonel Nauman Saeed, said he believed the people of Bajaur supported the fight to vanquish the Taliban.

In Peshawar, however, some of the store owners from Loe Sam whose property was crushed said there were limits to their patience.

They had heard no word about their return or reconstruction, said Haji Shakir, the owner of two stores in Loe Sam, as he sat on the floor of a crowded house with a group of fellow store keepers, clutching the account books that he had escaped with.

"If the government doesn't rebuild, we will be thieves, suicide bombers, we will be forced to do these things," he said.

Khan, the chief government representative in Bajaur, said he had funds, provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development, for rebuilding. But he did not know when it would begin.

Financial well being was not the only worry of the displaced. Many said they were angered by the high number of civilian deaths, particularly as they were fleeing in August and September when jet fighters and helicopter gunships were attacking Taliban redoubts.

The military said last week that 95 civilians had been killed in the Bajaur conflict, but the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said that number seemed low. There is no reliable count, because the commission was barred from investigating.

Similarly, there is little agreement about how many militants the army has killed. The army said 1,500. But

two officers, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were contradicting their superiors, said that number appeared excessive. One army captain involved in the fighting said 300 seemed closer.

While the resistance had been reduced on the flat land, one thing was certain. As the military readies to fight the militants in the mountainous areas of Mehmund and Charmang, deeper in Bajaur, progress will be more difficult. In his wood paneled office, Colonel Saeed said he was deep in a classic guerrilla conflict.

In September, he said, Rehman, the Taliban leader at the center of the Bajaur resistance, had replenished his forces with 950 more men from Afghanistan.

"You keep killing them," Colonel Saeed said, "but you still have them around."

Deaths in Somalia Outpace Delivery of Food

By JANE PERLEZ

In the damp, gray dawn in this remote Somali bush town, 25,000 men, women and children, their rib cages protruding, their eyes listless, shuffled with their last bit of strength today toward outdoor kitchens for a scoop of food.

Hundreds, too feeble to eat, died while they waited. Their bodies were hastily lowered into fresh graves hacked in the red soil as cooks boiled water inside to make a dollop of corn and sugar gruel for those who were still alive.

As those waiting for food huddled in silence, without a sound from anybody, the body of a teen-age boy who had just died was pushed under a bush until the feeding was over. Her Whole Family Lost

Outside one center, Fatima Mumin Sheik wept over the last of her five children, a 10-year-old girl, Ruquia, whose plate-thin body was tied in cloth, ready for burial. "This is the last," she said. "I've lost my husband too."

In the last month, a Red Cross official estimated, about 7,000 people have died of hunger in Baidoa, a town with an often-shifting population of about 40,000.

Many more died the month before in this place 150 miles northwest of the capital, Mogadishu, and similar numbers of deaths are occurring in half a dozen rural Somali towns, said the official, Geoff Loane, coordinator of the organization's relief in Somalia.

"Here is hell," said Mr. Loane, who worked in Ethiopia during the 1984-85 famine. "I thought I would never see Ethiopia again, and I didn't think we would allow it to happen again."

Red Cross officials say they believe that about one-third of Somalia's people, estimated to number anywhere from 4.5 million to 6 million, are likely to die in the next six months unless more food is pumped into the country.

A mostly desert nation on the eastern edge of the Horn of Africa, Somalia has been torn by fierce fighting since the ouster of the President of 21 years, Mohammed Siad Barre, in January 1991. When the warfare among militias increased last November in Mogadishu, about 30,000 people, most of them civilians, were killed.

Relief officials predicted then that a deep famine would strike Somalia because the intense fighting made the delivery of food extremely difficult and dangerous. Since then, continued warfare has driven people from their homes and fields, destroyed the nation's agriculture, and brought desperate hunger and want to the capital as well as to the countryside.

Despite the efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross, which says it is mounting the biggest operation in its history, the famine predicted six months ago has arrived, they say.

The magnitude of the problem staggers even the disaster-hardened officials of the Red Cross, an organization that is managing a \$100 million sea, air and land operation to deliver food to Somalia.

During the Ethiopian famine, about one million of the country's 40 million people are thought to have died. The director general of the Red Cross, Peter Fuchs, said in a telephone interview from Geneva that Somalia might well suffer more in absolute and proportional numbers. Third of People Threatened

"Unless we step up our efforts, one-third of the people are in acute danger of disappearing," Dr. Fuchs said. "Those we are reaching can just survive. They are not out of danger."

One factor in this famine is the drought that is affecting a vast swath of eastern Africa, which has threatened Ethiopia, Kenya and other countries with famine. But none of the other countries also faces a continuing war.

Noting the high percentage of deaths in Baidoa, Mr. Loane said, "You can't deal with it." He added that there were similar death rates in Gelib, near Kismayo on the southern coast; in Corioley, near Merca, also in the south; in Beladwane, on the Ethiopian border, and in Bardera, east of the Kenyan border.

"These are just the places I've seen," he said. "I'm told by the governor that Bakhool north of here is worse." Here in Baidoa, the director of the three centers of the United Nations Children's Fund, Dr. Siad Muse Aden, pointed to countless children he said would die in the next few days, despite the one feeding a day provided by Unicef. Dr. Aden gestured toward one child, a shriveled 5-year-old named Manour, whose father tried to warm him with the embers from a kerchief-sized fire in the grounds of the feeding center. "He will die," Dr. Aden said. "There is no hope," A Foot-Long Grave

An hour earlier, 4-month-old Mahoumoud Abdul, the first and only child of 22-year-old Kuresh Mohamed, died. His tiny body, first tied in his mother's shawl and then swathed in a white scarf scrounged from somewhere for burial, was lowered into a deep but only foot-long grave by a grieving Mrs. Mohamed.

She and her husband, Mohamed Abdi, had walked to town from their village 30 miles away after their sheep, cattle and grain were stolen by armed gangs, she said. She came to the feeding center this morning for help for her child, but buried him instead among the dozens of mounds of red soil that signified graves.

The Red Cross is seeking to arrange safe passage from marauding gangs for more food for the 22 Red Cross kitchens, where huge vats of rice, beans and oil were being stirred today for distribution at noon. The supervisor, Mohamed Betar, said one graveyard of the weak who had died there was already filled.

"Every kitchen has its graveyard," Mr. Betar said. "This is the second graveyard for this kitchen," he added, pointing to about 20 graves in a field across the road from the kitchen. "Every day we have people dead at every kitchen. These are the known ones. Others die on the way into town, or in town."

By noon, the weakest of the thousand or so people who were waiting for food at Mr. Betar's kitchen were called to eat. There was some shoving, and the food that had been heaved out of the vats was then dumped into a variety of containers held by the hungry: the corner of a shawl, a battered tin cup, a plastic bag, even a hat.

The multiple catastrophes in Somalia -- the militia fighting, the drought, the countrywide lawlessness and now the terrible food shortages -- have proved intractable problems for the United Nations and humanitarian agencies. Two Calamities at Once

The society, largely nomadic and dependent on the trading of cattle, camels and sheep for its livelihood, has completely broken down, according to the educated Somalis who have remained in the country. Traditionally, Somalis could cope with either drought, which came in cycles, or war, which was also common but involved pockets of rural clan fighting with spears, not assault rifles and artillery.

But this crisis forces the Somalis to deal with both drought and war together, as well as with the modern-day equipment of war. Much of that was supplied by the United States in the 1980's and the Soviet Union in the 1970's, when Somalia was considered by the superpowers to have a strategic position on the Horn of Africa, where it was formed when British and Italian colonies united and declared independence in 1960.

The anarchy and looting in the rural areas around Baidoa has pushed tens of thousands of people into the town over the last months, and the war coupled with the drought has destroyed the roots of the nation's agriculture.

About 25 percent of the nation's cattle and untold numbers of its millions of camels have died, according to Hussein Iman, the former head of planning for the agriculture department, who now works for the Red Cross.

Mr. Iman said armed gangs had looted most of the pumps at water holes in the southern part of the country, denying cows water. In late May, Red Cross workers had to dig vast ditches in southern Somalia to bury 200,000 cattle that died for lack of water, Mr. Loane said.

The land around Baidoa is usually the granary of Somalia, providing huge quantities of sorghum, which

at this time of year should be shoulder-high and green. But militias affiliated with Mr. Siad Barre, which are trying to reclaim territory and from the militia of Gen. Mohamed Farrah Aidid, have pushed farmers off their land and made it impossible to deliver seed. Even though it is now raining in Baidoa, there are no plants in the fields because of the lack of seed.

The desperation in the countryside has pushed more than 300,000 Somali refugees into northern Kenya in the last six months and forced thousands of others on hazardous trips on overcrowded ships and dhows to Yemen and the Kenyan coast.

Dr. Fuchs of the Red Cross estimates that 2 million to 2.5 million Somalis -- a third to a half of the population -- have been displaced from their traditional lands and are seeking food and shelter elsewhere.

And for educated Somalis, the anarchy has left some stark choices. "You leave, or work for a humanitarian organization, or take a gun and become a looter -- there is nothing else to do," said Mr. Iman, who has been trying to buy back the looted parts of water pumps at local markets and re-establish water holes.

While the fighting in the countryside has worsened, the conflict in Mogadishu between two wings of the group that took power from Mr. Siad Barre, the United Somali Congress, has quieted since March when a cease-fire was worked out. But after the warfare subsided, the hunger in the ruined city, once a fairly affluent Indian Ocean capital, increased. 400 Open-Air Kitchens

In late May, the Red Cross started the open-air kitchens in the city. There are now more than 200 of these kitchens in Mogadishu and another 200 scattered in the countryside where about 500,000 people are served every day. But even in Mogadishu, where the food situation has improved and is better than in the countryside, people are dying as they wait for food. Nuro Gutale Guled, the head of one of the kitchens in Mogadishu said, "I had two people die here yesterday."

"I have children like this every day," she said, pointing to 10-year-old Abdul Kadir Isak, a skeleton of a boy too weak to walk, hunched on the ground. Someone pushed a platter of rice in front of Abdul, but he was too feeble to swallow it. He just stared at the whiteness. "He won't live until tomorrow," Mrs. Nuro said.

Tensions in Mogadishu between two warlords, General Aidid and Ali Mahdi Mohamed, had relaxed somewhat recently, but in the last two weeks they have again risen. The new squabbling between the two factions has delayed the arrival of 46 unarmed United Nations cease-fire observers, scheduled to monitor the cease-fire.

The tensions in Mogadishu have increased in large part because General Aidid accuses the United Nations of sending money and uniforms by plane to Mr. Mahdi's northern side of Mogadishu. While the United Nations has denied that it had anything to do with the flight, the money and uniforms arrived on a plane that had previously been chartered by the United Nations and still bore United Nations markings.

General Aidid has refused to allow the United Nations observers to land in Mogadishu.

As the hunger and the fighting continue, the relief efforts go on. Two ships -- one from the Red Cross and the other from the United Nations -- carrying about 5,000 tons of food each were unloaded at the port this week. The unloading proceeded fairly smoothly with the help of about 900 armed men from various political factions who are paid in food to protect the consignments from thousands of armed and hungry men who seek to take it, aid officials said.

But given the new tensions, it was not clear if such smooth deliveries to Mogadishu port would continue, they said.

To short-circuit the problems of deliveries at the port, Mr. Loane said the Red Cross was continuing to fly in food by Hercules plane twice a day from Mombasa, Kenya, to Baidoa. The Red Cross is also using helicopters to bring food from ships moored off the coast well north of Mogadishu, and to bring food by barges pulled in by winches to beaches at the southern port of Merca.

Even so, he said, such an elaborate logistical operation was not providing enough seed for those still strong enough to plant and not enough food to prevent deaths on a larger scale than already seen.