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Pakistan to pay hefty price for assault

By Syed Fazl-e-Haider

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Following months of deliberation, Pakistan has launched what it hopes will be a comprehensive and decisive military operation against foreign and local terrorists in North Waziristan, a region in country's northwestern tribal areas along the Afghanistan border which is branded by the US as a global headquarters for Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked militants.

The operation has been named "*Zarb-e-Azb*". *Azb* is an Arabic word - the name of the sword held by the Holy Prophet Muhammed (Peace be upon him). In the first four days of army action from June 15, more than 200 terrorists were killed. Among the dead were insurgents linked to recent Karachi airport attack that killed 38 people.

Pakistan took the difficult decision to undertake its first full-scale military operation against terrorists in North Waziristan after months of consideration. The decision was taken by the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who has so far been reluctant to opt for a military solution to the militancy issue. The Pakistani Taliban had gained time and space to re-group, reorganize and re-strengthen its operational capacity during peace talks with the government in the six months preceding the strike.

The June 8 Karachi airport attack, claimed by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), proved a game changer, with Pakistan's political and military leadership taking a u-turn in its counter-terrorism strategy. Sharif has categorically declared that the military operation will not end until

all terrorists are eliminated. The militants being targeted include locals and different foreign nationals including Chechens, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Tajiks and Uyghurs from western China.

The military offensive against extremists on Pakistani territory is only one part of a counter-terrorism strategy which will not be complete until Afghan and the US forces kill militants escaping into Afghanistan territory through the border. If the terrorists find a safe haven in Afghanistan with the support of some anti-Pakistan forces, as has been witnessed in the past, then the ongoing military operation will fail to achieve its goals.

Why has this crucial operation taken so long to be launched? The simple answer is fear of the consequences.

Firstly, the Pakistan army has indicated that it can clear the insurgency in North Waziristan within six weeks. But what happens after? The army will have to stay. When the Pakistan army launched a military operation against the Pakistani Taliban in 2009 in northwestern Swat valley, Mullah Fazlullah, who is the current chief of Pakistani Taliban, fled to Afghanistan and still operates from there.

The operation will also have serious social, economic and human costs. The possible blowback could take the shape of more militant attacks in Pakistan, a country which has seen some 60,000 of its civilians killed in terrorism-related violence. The country is likely to witness more terror attacks, more bloodshed and more devastation of infrastructure in retaliation.

But Pakistan is fighting a war for its ideological and territorial survival. At stake are the lives of its 180 million citizens and the country's fragile economy. The most pertinent question is whether Pakistan can afford to bear the costs of an ongoing military offensive?

The operation is likely to further polarize Pakistani society. Support for religious extremism and radical infiltration is already rife, even within segments of the security apparatus. The country will soon face the issues related to the rehabilitation of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons.

The North Waziristan operation, in terms of both direct and indirect economic costs, will be one of the most expensive military campaigns undertaken so far in the country's northwest, and could be a disaster for an economy already in troubled waters.

Pakistan has already spent US\$103 billion in a 12-year-long war on terror which has already hurt all sectors of the economy. Exports were affected as the trade delegations have been reluctant to visit the troubled country, and export orders are diverted to other countries or foreign buyers hold meeting at other destinations. This increases the cost of production and leave the country uncompetitive in the international market.

During the operation, the Pakistan Army will need to ask the government for additional funds at a time when it is facing difficulties in bridging the ever-widening gap between national income and expenditure. The country direly needs financial support to sustain a costly war against militancy that has weighed heavily on its efforts to attract much-needed foreign investment.

The economy will have to bear heavy costs in terms of further flight of capital, closure of industries, loss of employment, economic slowdown, loss of inflow of foreign direct investment, and devastation of the developmental infrastructure.

The US has long urged Islamabad to undertake a full-scale military offensive against Islamist extremists based in North Waziristan. Finally, the country has taken action. The international community must extend every possible help to Pakistan, which has ultimately taken a most difficult decision, with far-reaching ramifications for the whole region in wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of this year.