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Taliban seem to abandon guerrilla tactics in Pakistan conflict

By Saeed Shah and Nancy A. Youssef, Saeed
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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Taliban insurgents in Pakistan's Swat valley may be preparing to fight the army on the streets of the scenic district's main city, as soldiers and guerrillas adopt surprising conventional war tactics.

The army appears poised to enter Mingora city, lifting a curfew Friday to allow thousands of its remaining residents to flee. Whereas classic guerrillas would melt away into the hills, the Taliban in Mingora, puzzlingly, seemed to be waiting to take on the advancing troops.

The Pakistan army itself hasn't committed the number of troops that experts think would be required for counterinsurgency operations, and the high level of Taliban deaths the military has claimed would be unlikely if the Islamic extremists were using guerrilla tactics.

Officials in Washington , which has backed the Swat offensive, fear that key ally Pakistan risks excessive civilian casualties with its current approach, as thousands of residents remain trapped in the valley.

"If they (the Taliban) try to fight the army in Mingora or some other town, they don't stand a chance against the superior numbers which the army can assemble and the firepower the army can deliver," said analyst Javed Husain , a retired army brigadier who served in Pakistan's Special Services Group commando unit.

So far, the nine-day-old army offensive in Swat — which is 100 miles from Islamabad, Pakistan's capital — hasn't moved into the valley's towns. Those who managed to escape

Mingora, where five headless bodies were found this week, warned that the army would face tough resistance from deeply entrenched Taliban in the city.

Shaukat Saleem , a Mingora resident who escaped from Swat on Friday, said the Taliban had blocked roads in the city with trees and boulders. They've mined the streets, dug trenches, made bunkers and occupied many civilian homes, he said. He said that he saw "lots" of Taliban as he was leaving the city, who stopped him for questioning at 10 to 12 of their checkpoints.

"Mingora is completely in Taliban hands," said Saleem, who's now a refugee at the Jalozaï camp near Peshawar with his wife and son. "On the streets you only see Taliban and stray dogs."

The army estimated earlier this week that as many as 200,000 civilians were still in Mingora, and it was unknown how many remained there after Friday's exodus. The army said that it had cleared the area that leads to Mingora from the south as far as Udigram, a village on the outskirts of the city.

"We allowed the civilians to move out of Mingora city. We relaxed the curfew," said Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas, the army's chief spokesman.

Abbas declined to comment on the timing of a Mingora operation and whether the army would wait for all the residents to evacuate. It seems likely that thousands of them remain in the city, leading to fears that the Taliban might use them as "human shields."

It's taken years for the Pakistani public to back operations against the Taliban , and that support could evaporate easily.

Ali Dayan Hasan , a South Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch , a U.S.-based advocacy group, warned that the Taliban could be "luring" the army into a fight in Mingora.

"If there are lots of dead civilians and lots of dead soldiers (in Mingora), it could do morale-sapping damage," Hasan said. "If we hear of 2,000 civilians dying, say, it's all over."

The U.S. military has encouraged its Pakistani allies to embrace counterinsurgency tactics, which call for winning civilian support, not just killing the enemy and seizing ground. Some U.S. officials, however, worry that the Pakistani army isn't willing or able to move away from traditional war-fighting tactics.

"If you talk to the (Pakistani) military leadership, they say they get it, but do they understand it the way we understand it?" a senior U.S. military official told McClatchy , speaking on the condition of anonymity in order to be more candid. "Often their definition of counterinsurgency is warning a village before an attack. That's it."

The Pakistani army claims to have killed well more than 800 Taliban in Swat so far, including 200 at a training camp that was bombed from the air. Guerrilla tactics would have had the insurgents mounting hit-and-run operations and ambushes in small groups. If the high death toll

is correct, that would suggest that the militants were fighting pitched battles with the army, but assembling 200 Taliban at one spot would violate guerrilla instincts, analyst Husain said.

The Pakistani army has said that it's deployed as many as 15,000 men against a Taliban force it estimates at 4,000 to 5,000, in a war that's being fought in mountainous terrain. The standard counterinsurgency manual suggests that an army should outnumber a guerrilla enemy by 10 to 1 or more.

"Fifteen thousand is not enough at all. That's only enough to secure the operational area," Husain said. "They need more, and for that they would have to pull out troops from the eastern border."

To the frustration of Washington and other Western allies, Pakistan continues to deploy most of its army on its eastern border to safeguard against its traditional enemy, India , which it fears might attack while it's fighting the Taliban on its western border.