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Military Must Decapitate Militancy and Rehabilitate People in FATA – Quickly

Perception of the locals: Let's face the ground reality: Up until a few weeks ago, a large segment of population residing in Pakistan's tribal areas believed that the government as well as Pakistan's armed forces were running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. It appears that the perception - as a consequence of the renewed and a vigorous military operation - is now changing both in Bajaur Agency and Swat. To be certain, the Pakistani government and the military need to do a lot more to rectify this perception and that requires the continuity of the operation, rehabilitation of and assistance of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and ensuring law and order in the FATA.

Local tribesmen have seen the policy of the Pakistani government oscillating between confrontation and cooption; hence the apprehension. Some tribesmen have also suffered first-hand at the hands of the militants for cooperating with the security forces during the military operations. This would usually happen after the government would conclude generous peace agreements with the militants after the military operations leaving the militants as the main power-brokers in the area and the tribesmen at their mercy.

Miseries of noncombatants: The other aspect of past military operations against the pro-Taliban militants (or local militants) has been the use of air-power as the operation's centerpiece. This approach had further compounded the miseries of the non-militant tribal folks of FATA. Past and present military operations have resulted in large numbers of IDPs - mostly noncombatant civilians including large numbers of women, children, and the elderly. Among the IDPs, there's a very strong fear that they might find the same Taliban in control of the area upon their return to their homes.

Confidence increasing among locals: In Bajaur Agency, heavy clashes between the security forces and the militants and excessive use of aerial bombardment have once again displaced hundreds of thousands of people. However, the accurate targeting of some militant hideouts and annihilation of certain known militants (even if not the top leadership) has made locals believe that this particular military operation in Bajaur agency "means business." Acquiring confidence from this perception, the local tribesmen have confronted militants in certain areas of Bajaur and the adjacent Dir and Buner districts of NWFP. This not only testifies to the strengthening of public confidence in the government's resolve to take the

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militants on, but also to the fact that the tribesmen do not like militants.

As the tribesmen in FATA are gaining confidence because of the boldness

shown by the military in confronting the militants in Bajaur, the government will also have to show more proof of their seriousness and their resolve in other militant-infected areas. The government and armed forces can further solidify the locals' confidence if some big fish of the militancy in Bajaur are taken out. Decapitating this Frankenstein will deteriorate the rest of the body and tribesmen would certainly gain greater control and confidence. The government would also have to deliver and demonstrate increased seriousness to help address the needs of all the displaced persons as this could prove a great chance for the government to improve its repute and perception among the tribal people. Also upon the return of these IDPs, the government must boost the reconstruction and development activities to help these people get a new lease on life.

Dimensions of military action & next steps: The aerial bombardment has continued for a long time now and has contributed to the mass exodus of the tribal people. Recently, parliamentarians from the tribal areas have appealed to the government to stop aerial bombardment and send in land forces to assume control on the ground. This will ensure the government's writ and deliver a sense of security. The aerial bombardment maybe the least risky and most damaging form of action against insurgents, it does not, however, ensure the writ of the state and there is always the danger of "collateral damage."

Military should keep moving in this direction and must hold the militants' leadership accountable and restore the writ of the state subsequently. This will best be done by ground forces, which need to step in sooner than later. Once the militant leadership is taken out or held accountable, it will not be difficult for the security forces to largely restore the writ of state with the support of the tribesmen who have started cooperating with the security forces already.

The IDPs will have to be rehabilitated, and a mechanism evolved by virtue of which tribes will be held accountable for militant activities in their respective areas, as is the case with any other crime under the Federal Crimes Regulation (FCR), the law that governs FATA.

With a multi-pronged approach, the government can help reverse the militancy and accelerate development and reconstruction■