

Beat: Politics

Pakistan launches ground offensive in volatile tribal region

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USPA News - Pakistan's military launched a ground operation against militants in its volatile tribal region on early Monday morning, with soldiers searching house-to-house and engaging in gun battles with militants after more than half a million civilians fled the area, officials said. The area of Miranshah, the main town in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area, was the focus of the initial phase of the ground operation.

"House-to-house searches in Miranshah town are being carried out by infantry troops and special service groups," a military spokesman said. By Monday afternoon, the military said at least 15 militants had been killed in the first hours of the ground offensive. "Troops have recovered underground tunnels and IEDs (improvised explosive devices) factories inside the so far cleared area," the spokesman added. "Three soldiers got injured in exchange of fire." Military forces were also using artillery, tanks and other heavy weapons to strike "terrorist concentrations" in Mir Ali district, located just east of Miranshah. Cordons were in place to surround militant locations, the spokesman said, adding that the civilian population was evacuated before Monday's operation began. The ground offensive is part of Operation Zarb-e-Azb, which was launched with a campaign of airstrikes starting on June 15 after a group of militants launched a co-ordinated assault on Jinnah International Airport in Karachi, killing 26 people. The attack - in which 10 militants were also killed - was a joint effort by the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). According to Pakistan's military, by Monday afternoon, at least 376 militants and 17 service members had been killed since the operation began on June 15, but those figures cannot be independently verified. The military says it has also destroyed 61 militant hideouts and claims 19 militants have surrendered to security forces. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) confirmed Pakistani authorities had relaxed the curfew in North Waziristan on Sunday, allowing people to flee the area. "However, only a few hundred new families were registered, which shows that most of the people have already left the Agency," OCHA said in a situation report on Monday. According to the Disaster Management Authority in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a total of 468,048 people from North Waziristan had registered as internally displaced persons (IDPs) by Monday, though OCHA noted that a significant number of families remained unregistered because they either chose unfrequented routes or lacked identification documents, which affects mostly women. More than 95,000 civilians from North Waziristan have also fled to Khost province in Afghanistan, where they are receiving assistance from humanitarian and government agencies. "Unverified reports indicate that another approximately 10,000 people are in Paktia province who have not been assessed yet," OCHA said.

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