

PAKISTAN OPERATION: 800,000 DISPLACED, ARMY CLAIMS ZERO CIVILIAN DEATHS, BARBER AIDED TALIBAN ESCAPEES



Screengrab from Express Tribune video of Miramshah on July 10, 2014

Today, Pakistan's military escorted selected members of the media through Miramshah, which had been ground zero for militants in Pakistan's North Waziristan and the focus of the heaviest fighting in the Zarb-e-Azb offensive undertaken by the military last month. From the video provided in the Express Tribune story on Miramshah, it is clear that the town is essentially deserted and most buildings appear to be heavily damaged.

The offensive is taking a huge toll on Pakistan. Depending on the source cited, there are either 787,000 or 833,274 people who have been displaced from North Waziristan. Those are truly remarkable numbers, as the linked Washington Post article notes that previous estimates of the population of North Waziristan were only 600,000, so it is clear that virtually all citizens have left the region.

Because the media have been banned from the

region before today, Pakistan's military has controlled the flow of information. The latest claims I can find put the death toll at 400 militants and 20 soldiers. No information on civilian deaths has been released and the military claimed that the civilian death toll was zero even after over 200 militants were said to have been killed.

One of the most remarkable stories to emerge along with those who have fled Miramshah is that of Azam Khan, who was a barber in Miramshah:

Azam Khan was one of the top barbers in Miranshah – the main town of North Waziristan – until he, like nearly half a million others, fled the long-awaited offensive unleashed by the Pakistan military on the tribal area in June.

He told AFP his business boomed in the month leading up to the army assault as the militants sought to shed their distinctive long-haired, bearded look.

"I have trimmed the hair and beards of more than 700 local and Uzbek militants ahead of the security forces' operation," he said while cutting hair in a shop in Bannu, the town where most civilians fled.

For years he cut Taliban commanders' hair to match the flowing locks of former Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader Hakimullah Mehsud, killed by a US drone last November, but in May a change in style was called for.

"The same leaders came asking for trimming their beards and hair very short, saying that they were going to the Gulf and wanted to avoid problems at Pakistani airports," Khan said.

It would seem that there is now a good chance that the real targets of this offensive left before it even began. All citizens of the region

have been displaced and most buildings have been rendered useless, only to kill the low level forces who were left behind because they didn't have the resources to flee along with their leaders.