Struggle for Land to Spread from Pakistan to U.S.?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Critical Comment - The peasants in Taliban-influenced Pakistan's Swat region have taken over landlords' estates and mines, according to a scolding New York Times report on Friday. "Diabolical" or "Islamist" though it may be, it's an interesting development with global implications.

The Times' coverage of the revolt tries to paint the situation purely as outsider manipulation, with the implied threat to U.S. goals for "stability" in the region. In the interests of peace, why couldn't the U.S. score some points among the downtrodden by praising aspects of the land take-over? After all, Obama as president-elect supported the take-over of the Republic Windows and Doors factory by workers in Chicago.

The New York Times headline was "Taliban Exploit Class Rifts in Pakistan" -- but why not instead use the phrase "...Addresses Class Inequality..."? I'm sure some ugly events are going on, with sorrow coming from all sides, including ongoing U.S. bombing of civilians in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

It seems the landlord class is being strongly encouraged to leave. One reads of other dastardly tactics like families having to give up a son for the insurgents' forces. The tone of the Times article is as if any revolution anywhere is automatically uncalled for. The history of uprisings and revolutions, or demands for land reforms, has usually had the U.S. on the side of the elites and against "Communists" or whomever.

The New York Times has a credibility problem, as it represents the U.S. landlord class and has generally supported U.S. bombing campaigns against foreign civilians. Worst of all is the U.S.'s lack of respect in Pakistan and everywhere else, for its torture policies -- which Obama has decided not to prosecute. One can imagine that part of his being allowed to become president is that he pardons the old guard who handed over the keys to the castle. "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss." - the Who.

The way the Taliban have been demonized, who wants what the Times calls "Taliban Extend Reach in Pakistan" (alternative headline for the same story)? Answer: the landless, apparently. To take a cynical view, let's say no good can come of this, and we can only deplore the male chauvinist, fundamentalist, violent Taliban. But we also must admit that they hit upon a popular campaign and it's working. Could it be they are the liberators for the peasants? Oh no, if we're good readers of the New York Times.

A violent take-over of the land by the landless is not ideal. If the people have a claim to the land and are trying to survive, non-violent means should be pursued faithfully.

But peasants' land is never stolen without violence by the takers in the first place, because people don't give up their ancestral homes willingly. So violence by the usurpers begets violence some day, unless a Gandhi comes along.

A U.S. land-reform Gandhi some day?

People in the U.S. are generally landless and do not realize it. Even if someone has paid off the mortgage, the average

home does not have enough yard space to grow much food or keep livestock. In the last several decades the U.S. population lost its small farms, and many of us willingly bought into the lie that all one needs is cash and cheap petroleum. The U.S. census no longer has a "farmer" designation, for lack of enough farmers!

Now we are starting to see the unjust jive of urbanization and modernization. The hippies' back-to-the-land movement was one counter trend, just as the present phenomenon of more household gardening and farmers markets are an attempt to benefit more directly from life-giving land. It's more than a "let's be more green" fad or a temporary response to a recession.

For some of us know that the days of cheap, limitless petroleum are over, spelling the end of false plenty from agribusiness food. What will become of the degraded farms where monocropped and genetically modified organisms' tolerance to massively increased herbicide held sway, thanks to subsidies now fading? People will want to farm these lands for subsistence, or perhaps run bison on some of the lands as a sustainable resource par excellence.

For urban landscapes, where everything has been fenced and paved, the need for community food gardens will call for depaving and transforming lawns to rows of vegetables. Ultimately, because there are too many people to be fed without constant supplies of cheap petroleum for agriculture and food distribution, it may take an urban die-off to reach equilibrium. Then today's oil-infrastructure cities may become food forests.

Meanwhile, we begin the transformational tasks now. It is not yet clear to landless Americans who have been evicted by irresponsible and greedy banks that a reconnection to the land is the right prescription. Still, the idea of cash for buying whatever one needs pervades, perpetuated by corporate media reminding folks that economic growth will return. However, people will not be put off for long. They may have more in common with the peasants of Pakistan and the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico than with bankers or the Military Industrial Complex occupiers of vast areas of land in the U.S and abroad.

"Taliban Exploit Class Rifts in Pakistan" New York Times

By JANE PERLEZ and PIR ZUBAIR SHAH

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PESHAWAR, Pakistan — The Taliban have advanced deeper into Pakistan by engineering a class revolt that exploits profound fissures between a small group of wealthy landlords and their landless tenants, according to government officials and analysts here.

Supporters of Islamic law on Thursday in the Swat Valley, a Pakistani region where the Taliban exploited class rifts to gain control.

The strategy cleared a path to power for the Taliban in the Swat Valley, where the government allowed Islamic law to be imposed this week, and it carries broad dangers for the rest of Pakistan, particularly the militants' main goal, the populous heartland of Punjab Province.

In Swat, accounts from those who have fled now make clear that the Taliban seized control by pushing out about four

dozen landlords who held the most power.

To do so, the militants organized peasants into armed gangs that became their shock troops, the residents, government officials and analysts said.

The approach allowed the Taliban to offer economic spoils to people frustrated with lax and corrupt government even as the militants imposed a strict form of Islam through terror and intimidation.

“This was a bloody revolution in Swat,” said a senior Pakistani official who oversees Swat, speaking on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation by the Taliban. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it sweeps the established order of Pakistan.”

The Taliban’s ability to exploit class divisions adds a new dimension to the insurgency and is raising alarm about the risks to Pakistan, which remains largely feudal.

Unlike India after independence in 1947, Pakistan maintained a narrow landed upper class that kept its vast holdings while its workers remained subservient, the officials and analysts said. Successive Pakistani governments have since failed to provide land reform and even the most basic forms of education and health care. Avenues to advancement for the vast majority of rural poor do not exist.

Analysts and other government officials warn that the strategy executed in Swat is easily transferable to Punjab, saying that the province, where militant groups are already showing strength, is ripe for the same social upheavals that have convulsed Swat and the tribal areas.

Mahboob Mahmood, a Pakistani-American lawyer and former classmate of President Obama’s, said, “The people of Pakistan are psychologically ready for a revolution.”

Sunni militancy is taking advantage of deep class divisions that have long festered in Pakistan, he said. “The militants, for their part, are promising more than just proscriptions on music and schooling,” he said. “They are also promising Islamic justice, effective government and economic redistribution.”

The Taliban strategy in Swat, an area of 1.3 million people with fertile orchards, vast plots of timber and valuable emerald mines, unfolded in stages over five years, analysts said.

The momentum of the insurgency built in the past two years, when the Taliban, reinforced by seasoned fighters from the tribal areas with links to Al Qaeda, fought the Pakistani Army to a standstill, said a Pakistani intelligence agent who works in the Swat region.

The insurgents struck at any competing point of power: landlords and elected leaders — who were usually the same people — and an underpaid and unmotivated police force, said Khadim Hussain, a linguistics and communications professor at Bahria University in Islamabad, the capital.

At the same time, the Taliban exploited the resentments of the landless tenants, particularly the fact that they had many unresolved cases against their bosses in a slow-moving and corrupt justice system, Mr. Hussain and residents who fled the area said.

Their grievances were stoked by a young militant, Maulana Fazlullah, who set up an FM radio station in 2004 to appeal to the disenfranchised. The broadcasts featured easy-to-understand examples using goats, cows, milk and grass. By 2006, Mr. Fazlullah had formed a ragtag force of landless peasants armed by the Taliban, said Mr. Hussain and former residents of Swat.

At first, the pressure on the landlords was subtle. One landowner was pressed to take his son out of an English-speaking school offensive to the Taliban. Others were forced to make donations to the Taliban.

Then, in late 2007, Shujaat Ali Khan, the richest of the landowners, his brothers and his son, Jamal Nasir, the mayor of Swat, became targets.

After Shujaat Ali Khan, a senior politician in the Pakistan Muslim League-Q, narrowly missed being killed by a roadside bomb, he fled to London. A brother, Fateh Ali Mohammed, a former senator, left, too, and now lives in Islamabad. Mr. Nasir also fled.

Later, the Taliban published a “most wanted” list of 43 prominent names, said Muhammad Sher Khan, a landlord who is a politician with the Pakistan Peoples Party, and whose name was on the list. All those named were ordered to present themselves to the Taliban courts or risk being killed, he said. “When you know that they will hang and kill you, how will you dare go back there?” Mr. Khan, hiding in Punjab, said in a telephone interview. “Being on the list meant ‘Don’t come back to Swat.’ ”

One of the main enforcers of the new order was Ibn-e-Amin, a Taliban commander from the same area as the landowners, called Matta. The fact that Mr. Amin came from Matta, and knew who was who there, put even more pressure on the landowners, Mr. Hussain said.

According to Pakistani news reports, Mr. Amin was arrested in August 2004 on suspicion of having links to Al Qaeda and was released in November 2006. Another Pakistani intelligence agent said Mr. Amin often visited a madrasa in North Waziristan, the stronghold of Al Qaeda in the tribal areas, where he apparently received guidance.

Each time the landlords fled, their tenants were rewarded. They were encouraged to cut down the orchard trees and sell the wood for their own profit, the former residents said. Or they were told to pay the rent to the Taliban instead of their now absentee bosses.

Two dormant emerald mines have reopened under Taliban control. The militants have announced that they will receive one-third of the revenues.

Since the Taliban fought the military to a truce in Swat in February, the militants have deepened their approach and made clear who is in charge.

When provincial bureaucrats visit Mingora, Swat's capital, they must now follow the Taliban's orders and sit on the floor, surrounded by Taliban bearing weapons, and in some cases wearing suicide bomber vests, the senior provincial official said.

In many areas of Swat the Taliban have demanded that each family give up one son for training as a Taliban fighter, said Mohammad Amad, executive director of a nongovernmental group, the Initiative for Development and Empowerment Axis.

A landlord who fled with his family last year said he received a chilling message last week. His tenants called him in Peshawar, the capital of North-West Frontier Province, which includes Swat, to tell him his huge house was being demolished, he said in an interview here.

The most crushing news was about his finances. He had sold his fruit crop in advance, though at a quarter of last year's price. But even that smaller yield would not be his, his tenants said, relaying the Taliban message. The buyer had been ordered to give the money to the Taliban instead.

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"Taliban Exploit Class Rifts in Pakistan" New York Times:
nytimes.com

"Obama Supports the Workers' Occupation of Republic Windows and Doors" by Jan Lundberg, December 7, 2008:

culturechange.org

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