

Operation Black Thunderstorm



Date: 26 April 2009 – 14 June 2009 (1 month, 2 weeks and 5 days)

Location: Swat, Buner, Lower Dir, Shangla District, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province

Result: Pakistani victory Districts returned to government control, writ of the state established
Many Pakistani Taliban militants and commanders killed or captured, remaining fled to Afghanistan

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Operation Black Thunderstorm was a military operation that commenced on 26 April 2009, conducted by the Pakistan Army, with the aim of retaking Buner, Lower Dir, Swat and Shangla districts from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the militants took control of them since the start of the year.

Attack on Lower Dir

Operation Toar Tander-I (Black Thunderstorm-I) began in Lower Dir as the Frontier Corps (FC) killed 26 Taliban, including key commanders Maulana Shahid and Qari Quraish. The operation was launched on 26 April, after the Taliban, in violation of the peace agreement, attacked security forces and government officials and closed roads for the movement of government and FC convoys. In some villages, the Taliban had looted shops and tortured villagers to gain their support, adding that a jirga had also been forced to back them. Officials said the forces were gaining ground against the Taliban and their hideouts in Kalkot, Islam Dara and Hoshyari Dara were targeted. Paramilitary troops and helicopter gunships bombed suspected Taliban bases during the operation. Eight soldiers and around 50 militants were killed in two days of fighting. The operation mostly

cleared the Lower Dir district of Taliban forces by 28 April. However, the military was still fighting with pockets of militant resistance in the coming weeks.

Buner Assault

The second phase of the operation started the same day as fighting in Lower Dir was dying down. The Pakistani Taliban had entered the town of Buner that was outside the Swat region and closer to the capital of Islamabad, had closed a local shrine and captured local policemen in defiance of the state and a prior peace agreement with the government. The Pakistan Army's push to retake control of Buner, which was only 100 kilometres (62 mi) away from the capital city Islamabad, started. Special Forces members belonging to Pakistan Army's 50th Airborne Division and the Pakistan Army's Special Services Group swarmed down ropes from helicopters to enter the town of Daggar, which lies in the strategically important Buna valley to the northwest of Islamabad, killing nearly 50 militants.

Pakistan Army leaders hoped to trap about 500 militants in between the 50th Airborne forces and SSG Division's teams that were advancing on the ground towards Taliban positions at the valley's entrance. The fate of 75 police officers taken hostage by the Taliban in Buner the previous night remained unclear. 18 were rescued the next day but the others were still prisoners. The troops belonging to 50th Airborne Division jumped first on 30 April in Buner City between 00:48 and 01:40. The battle between the Pakistani Air Force and Taliban forces ended when the Taliban had lost a large number of their men and suffered heavy human casualties caused by the Airborne Forces of Pakistan Armed Forces. The operation in Daggar came on the third day of the Army's offensive to roll back the Taliban advance that had caused concern not just in Islamabad – which is just 65 miles away – but also in Washington. Major General Athar Abbas, a military spokesman, told reporters in Rawalpindi that the Army and Frontier Corps paramilitary units launched the operation in Buner district, building on a several-day offensive in the region. Abbas said an estimated 450 to 500 Taliban are believed active in Buner, many believed to be engaged in "criminal activities."

On 2 May, another 10 soldiers were captured in Buner. The military confirmed that some 87 militants and four soldiers had been killed in fighting in the district between 28 April and 4 May. The military also stated that its troops were confronted during the fighting with wave attacks of suicide car-bombers. At least 27 suicide bombers were killed in the fighting. By 5 May, troops started to push back the Taliban militants in Buner.

Operation Rah-e-Rast

On 5 May, the third phase of the operation started as airborne troops boarded on C-130 transport aircraft, jumped off and stormed the militant-held valley of Swat. The name of this sub-operation of Black Thunderstorm has been referred to as Operation Rah-e-Rast in Urdu [citation needed] . In more than a month of fighting, by 15, 30 June soldiers and 1,040 militants were killed. Militant fighters were holed up in the emerald mines and in the main town of Swat district, Mingora. The emerald mines were secured by the Army's 50th Airborne division by 7 May, but the militants were still holding their positions in Mingora and on a strategic hilltop overlooking the town. Meanwhile, on 7 May, in Lower Dir, which was previously declared clear of the Taliban by the military, militants overran a paramilitary fort, killing three paramilitary soldiers and capturing 10 policemen. On the midnight of 10 May, additional airborne troops with small teams of Pakistan Navy SEALs jumped off from C-130 transport aircraft, and attacked a Taliban hidden training camp at Banai Baba in Shangla district, which is just east from Swat.

By 15 May, the Army claimed that Buner was finally completely cleared of Taliban forces, however artillery bombardment of Taliban positions in the hills was still ongoing. And it was reported that

the Taliban were more dug in and in larger numbers in Buner than the military previously assumed. Meanwhile, the Pakistani military continued with their push up the Swat valley. As the military approached Mingora, the Taliban were digging in for a "bloody urban battle" against the Pakistani army's airborne forces in a hotly disputed city in the north-western part of the country. The Taliban began concentrating forces in Mingora - digging trenches, laying mines and taking positions on rooftops.

On 17 May, heavy street fighting started in the towns of Kanju and Matta and the Army was slowly advancing towards Mingora. Also, a few days later fighting started in the area of the Takhtaband bridge for control of this crossing point. On 20 May, a key town in Buner was captured by the Army. The Army captured Sultanwas in fighting which, according to the military, killed one soldier and 80 militants, another nine soldiers were wounded. By 23 May, Kanju, Matta and the Takhtaband bridge had been secured by the military, but fighting was still going on in Takhtaband itself and the Buner and Dir districts, where nine more militants were killed. Meanwhile, the military was surrounding the main militant base in the Peochar Valley.

Battle for Mingora

On 23 May, the battle for the capital of Swat, Mingora, started as the small teams belonging to SSG Division accompanied with Army Rangers stormed the city. The Ranger and SSG Division's teams entered in the city from two different phases. The SSG Division's team at first entered the city from the air as they were parachuted. At the same time, the Army Rangers and additional SSG Division's teams entered the city as they were boarded on M113C and the APC Talha-B. Combat here was heavy, intense, and occurred in the streets. Taliban Fighters had dug themselves into bunkers built into hotels and government buildings. Pakistan's SSG and Army Rangers had fought the Taliban fighters hand-to-hand inside the buildings and hotels. By 27 May, the military took control of 70 percent of the city, including the city's airport, and Taliban forces across Swat were in retreat, but fighting was still continuing. At the same time, in continuing battles in Lower Dir and Shangla, three more soldiers and eight militants were killed.

On 29 May, the Army cleared Aman Kot and the Technical Institute College on the Mingora-Kokarai road in Mingora. On the same day, the village of Peochar in the Peochar Valley, as well as the town of Bahrain in the north of Swat, had been taken by the military. On 30 May, the Pakistani military had taken back the city of Mingora from the Taliban, calling it a significant victory in its offensive against the Taliban. However, some sporadic fighting was still continuing on the city's outskirts. Also, sporadic fighting was continuing in the rest of Swat and in the Shangla district where on 2 June, two soldiers and five militants were killed. In the battle for Mingora 286 militants were killed.

Sporadic fighting

By this point, the Pakistan Military was in control of much of Swat, however sporadic fighting still continued, especially in the Upper Dir District. After a bomb explosion in Hayagai Sharki village's masjid in Dir, which killed 38 civilians, local tribesmen, between 1,000 and 1,500, formed a lashkar (citizen's militia) and retaliated against the Taliban and TNSM by taking up arms and surrounding almost 300 militants. On 12 June, troops captured the town of Chuprial in Swat in a major battle that left 39 militants and 10 soldiers dead. This was the last major battle, and one of the most bloody, of the operation. On 14 June, the operation ended with Pakistani troops consolidating their positions in the four districts and going after the remaining pockets of resistance, primarily in the Swat valley.

Casualties

In all, according to the military, 50 soldiers and at least 1,475 militants were killed and 100 soldiers were wounded during operation Black Thunderstorm. 114 militants were captured, including some local commanders.

Foreign involvement, Conclusion and aftermath

Pakistan's foreign office spokesman had confirmed that there was a heavy influx of foreigners aiding the Taliban and that weapons were coming from the adjacent country of Afghanistan. Many Pakistani defence analysts and experts had publicly accused India and Afghanistan of aiding the Taliban to destabilize Pakistan. On 19 May 2009, the Pakistan Army captured three foreign fighters from Mingora District. According to the Pakistani Army, all these foreign fighters were Libyan nationals. The Pakistani Army also captured five Saudi nationals during the search operation.

Parliamentarian Khawaja Muhammad Asif of Pakistan Muslim League-N held a press conference in the Parliament media lounge, where he warned Afghan President Hamid Karzai. He said that "Karzai became President with the support of Pakistan". He also warned him that Afghanistan should not play with Pakistan's security. After the convincing evidence, Pakistan, along with United States and NATO, found out the significant routes that were using to supply heavy weaponry to Taliban. Pakistan blocked the routes successfully. On 17 May, M.I. learnt that a large numbers of Taliban fighters with a number of foreign fighters, were presented in Khyber Pass, and possibly, were planning to re-take the Swat from the Army.

The various media reports stated that foreign fighters were Uzbek and Tajik nationals. Pakistani Commandos also recovered a large amount of weaponry in trucks. During the battle, Pakistani special forces also successfully secured NATO's supply-line trucks that were constantly targeted by the Taliban fighters. After a day long battle, Taliban began to flee from the area at night, but while trying to escape, the SSG and the Ranger teams had intercepted their hiding locations. The final battle concluded as Pakistan Army as victorious and eliminating the major Taliban leadership from the war theater.

General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, then Chief of Army Staff: "The military is committed to bringing peace to Swat and restoring it to its former glory."