

Obama's Cairo speech and a new world order

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A joke from the Bush-Blair era went like this: on the sidelines of a G8 Summit, the two buddies were laughing over a joke when Condoleezza Rice walked in and asked them what they were laughing about. Bush replied that they were discussing the Third World War that would kill a billion Muslims and a dentist. A surprised Rice asked "why one dentist?" An amused Bush turned to Blair and said, "See I told you no one cares about the Muslims."

President Barak Obama's epoch-making speech at Cairo University on June 4th was significant for many of the things he said but it was most significant because he was able to convey to the Muslims that he cared for them. He dug into history of the monolithic religions; into his own past and from these he brought out substance intended to rebuild the bridges with the Muslim world that his predecessor had so insensitively tried to destroy. He said that the three monolithic religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam reject the killing of innocent men, women and children and concluded that the fight against extremism and violence should be a common cause of the followers of these three great faiths. He has rationally tried to bind the followers of these three religions against terror and violence worldwide, sidetracking Bush's War on Terror that, in a moment of candor, he had called a Crusade.

Obama was at his eloquent best, a model of composure and sincerity, as he delivered his speech from the podium of Cairo University with the world eagerly watching him with very high expectations. Although the speech was heralded as one intended to reach out to the Muslims, it had in it almost all the issues that divide nations in the contemporary world. He placed extremism and violence as the first of these divisive issues and then proceeded with the Palestinian problem; the rights and responsibilities of nuclear states; challenges to democ-

racy; religious freedom in the contemporary world; women's rights and concluded with economic development and opportunity. Quite understandably, he did not reach into much depth with these issues as those looking into these would have liked. Perhaps this was also not intended for he wanted the world, particularly the Muslim world, to understand that what his predecessor represented in foreign affairs was a minority view in his country and that he was appearing before the Muslim world with a view of the majority of US citizens. He drew a parallel with Al Qaeda and Islam, concluding that Al Qaeda likewise does not represent the majority view of the Muslim world and that the two vast majorities together should be bonded by history and religion in the common pursuit for peace.

Within these parameters, he has set very clear directions for his administration's change of course in foreign policy. He said that US troops from Iraq would be home by 2012. In Afghanistan, the US is not seeking a base and that US will lead a coalition of 46 countries there to complete the objective that his predecessor had started. He clearly identified the Al Qaeda as evil as forcefully as his predecessor but refrained from calling them Islamic terrorist. He acknowledged the ability of Al Qaeda for terrorism and violence worldwide but concluded that the best way to deal with them is to isolate them from the rest of the Muslim world, acknowledging Islam as a religion of peace. He identified Afghanistan and Pakistan as the new frontier for fighting Al Qaeda but asserted that the way to end Al Qaeda and their supporters the Taliban would be to strengthen the governments and the conditions of the people there to help them in turn to defeat the forces of terror.

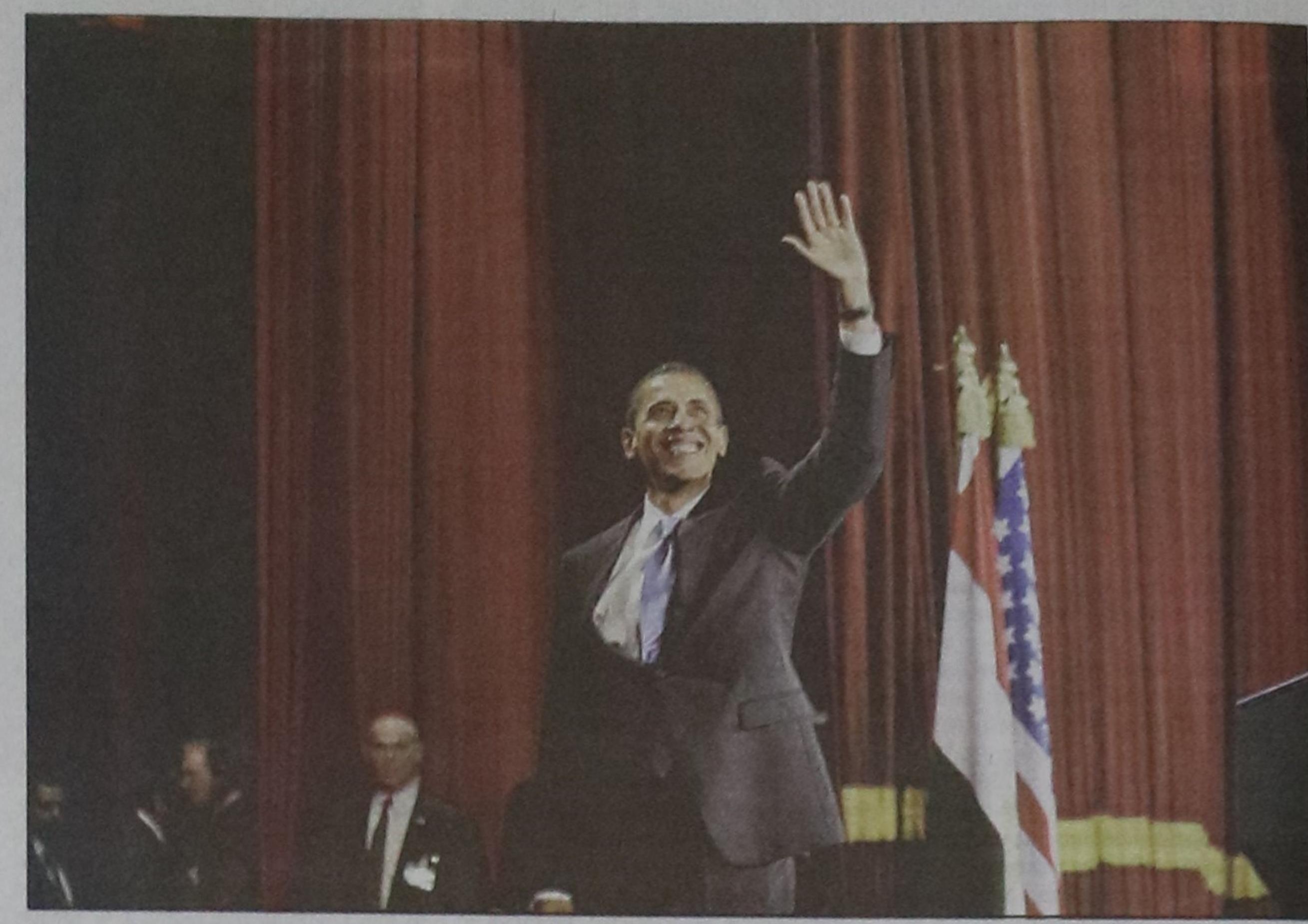
President Obama clearly understood the importance of the Palestinian issue as a key one of discontent in the Muslim worlds that both Al Qaeda and absolute monarchs and dictators have exploited. He said that the Palestinian issue should be resolved by the two-state policy

where an independent Israel and an independent Palestine would be able to co-exist. He called on Hamas to end their violence against Israel while asking Israel unequivocally to end settlements that is a major element of Palestinian discontent. He called US-Israel relations as "unbreakable." In acknowledging the need to settle the Palestinian problem, he has also sought to neutralize a fertile recruitment ground for Al Qaeda.

He also moved away from his predecessor in explaining that while the US foreign policy supports democratic changes worldwide, such changes can come only by internal efforts and not through regime change with outside assistance. He thus gave not just Iran a clear signal that US has no intention of interfering with their internal affairs; it has also resonated likewise in other Muslim countries, particularly in the Arab world. To Iran, Obama also reaffirmed a long standing US policy that all countries have the right to peaceful nuclear power if it complies with responsibilities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Reaction to the speech in the Arab world has been positive. Newspapers and TV channels welcomed the speech for the positive tone on Islam. Al Jazeera on its website covered the speech with caption reading "America is not at odds with Islam." The Palestinian Authority called it a "new beginning." Elsewhere, Muslims felt that in 55 minutes Obama has wiped out 8 years of Bush that would bring US closer to them. Hamas, in contrast, considered the speech a "palpable" change and added that it has many contradictions.

Not surprisingly, the speech has been criticized the most by neo-conservatives of the Republican Party and the Israeli lobby in the United States. They took the line that it has been improper for a US President to criticize his predecessor on foreign soil and to make an "apology speech" to the Muslims. They would have liked President Obama to criticize the dictators and monarchs and their un-democratic ways to take the heat off



Israel. One influential Republican, Senator Lugar, also a member of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, however, termed the speech as a "signal achievement" and dismissed it as too apologetic. However, he doubted how much impact the speech would have on the ME peace process or hasten the creation of a Palestinian state.

The road ahead for Obama's pursuit for peace will be a tough one. In Israel, a right wing Prime Minister is in power and President Obama can only push him to a point and not beyond. He must work with Prime Minister Netanyahu and other parties in Israel to convince them that unless they give the Palestinians their rights, they cannot achieve the peace they are seeking. It is however encouraging that President Obama has

focused on the Palestinian issue at the beginning of his first term while his two predecessors did so towards the end of their respective tenure. Time would thus be on his side in working for a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian issue.

Obama will also have a tough time in the days ahead balancing US's relations with the different and contrasting governments in the Middle East where there are conservative monarchies (Saudi Arabia and others); military leader (Egypt); clerical regime (Iran), and secular one (Syria). Equally difficult for him will be dealing with rise of political Islam in the Muslim countries. Afghanistan and Pakistan, where Al Qaeda and Taliban are resurgent again, will also test his skills to the fullest.

The tough road ahead notwithstanding, the merit of the Cairo speech does not need to be overemphasized if one just forgets Obama for a brief moment and goes back to the days of the Bush presidency. The Bush-Blair joke about the Muslims and the dentist had a dangerous underpinning; the two friends had set the world on course towards a Third World War; a war that Muslims, Christians and Jews all believe could have been doomsday. That prospect has been put into the cold storage of history with a bonus to boot; President Obama has given everyone the hope of a new world order and he has the power, well-earned respect and time to push for it.

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Germany's olive branch to Turkey for EU membership

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THE European Union of 27 nation-states has been delaying Turkey's entry into the Union by demanding hosts of unwarranted reforms. Many EU member countries do not want Turkey, a Muslim country with more than 70 million inhabitants, into the exclusive Christian Club and that is why a delaying strategy has been adopted.

France's conservative President Nicholas Sarkozy, son of a Hungarian immigrant, came out in 2007 with a statement that Turkey's geography did not make it eligible for membership into European Union.

It is true Turkey is in Asia and a tiny part of the country lies in Europe. Its capital city Ankara is in Asia and is not in Europe. But at the same time Greek-Cyprus, part of the Island, which is located 80 kilometer south of Turkey, could become member of the EU. It demonstrates that geographical position does not matter so long the country has a Christian-majority people. For Turkey, it seems geographical position is an excuse for some of the EU members to deny Turkey's entry.

The European Union's action is risking a backlash in Turkey. One survey revealed Turkish approval of Europe to be falling rapidly. Just 27% of Turks reportedly has a favourable opinion of the European Union, compared to 58% per cent in 2004. The ongoing frustration in Turkey over its on and off membership negotiations with the European Union

policy. To join as a member of the European Union, a country needs to discuss nearly 33 policy areas.

Germany was not favourable to Turkish entry to the EU. Chancellor Angela Merkel of the Christian Democratic Party talked about a "privileged partnership" for Turkey. It meant that Turkey would be granted substantial benefits but barred from membership, thus denying Turkey the right to vote on EU matters. Why would Turkey accept such "second-grade" position?

However, Chancellor Angela Merkel, as a political necessity, has reportedly abandoned the stance because she wants to reach out to Germany's approximately 690,000 Turkish voters. The EU parliamentary election was held on 4th June in the EU member states. For Chancellor Merkel, the results of the parliamentary election for EU may act as a barometer for Germany's general elections in September this year.

The Chancellor realises that her party needs as many votes as possible for her re-election. She and her party have refrained from making adverse comments on Turkey's entry into the EU or EU's enlargement or any other major issue.

The time is over for a Christian Democratic Party in Germany to adopt an anti-Turkey campaign," said Gerhard Hirscher, an analyst at the Hanns Seidel Foundation. He reportedly added: "The foreign policy experts in the party have made it clear they do not support the idea of using the European Parliament elections to campaign against Turkey's joining the EU. Turkey is an important country and more importantly, every

general election is held in Germany, with 23% per cent for the Green Party and only 10% per cent for the Chancellor's party. The majority of Turkish voters support these two parties because they support integration policies for Turks in the country.

Some say that many Turkish people are fed up with the delaying tactics of some members of the EU and want to show their separate identity by becoming anti-West. After all Turkey is a proud nation with a great history. Between 1526 and 1566, Turkey's Ottoman Empire conquered many eastern European countries and knocked the door of Vienna.

Another important fact to note is that Turkey has been one of the first stops on the US President Obama's first European trip in April this year. Such a visit to Turkey is made within the context of a "European" as opposed to a "Middle Eastern" trip to demonstrate that the United States considers Turkish membership in the EU and stronger ties to the West to be an important strategic objective. He specifically supported Turkey's efforts to join the EU.

President Obama did not visit Greece and it is interesting to note that he equated in his speech President Demetrios Christofias, the internationally recognized President of the Republic of Cyprus (Greek-dominated Cyprus), with that of the leader of the Turkish Cypriot President, Mehmet Ali Talat, (only Turkey recognizes him as the President) as being the "two Cypriot leaders."

President Obama spoke before the Turkish parliament and referred to Turkey as being a "...resolute ally and a responsible partner in transatlantic and European institutions".

Turkey is strategically located between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea and controls the gateway between the two seas. While Turkey is a valued member of NATO, there is no valid reason why Turkey should not be a member of the EU. Turkish membership would strengthen the EU and would fill in the gap between the Muslim and Christian worlds which is imperative for global peace and harmony at this juncture of time. Reality and pragmatism and not prejudice should guide the entry-policy of the EU towards Turkey.

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are vividly reflected in these data.

European member states opened accession negotiations with Turkey during the last week of June 2007 on two new policy areas: statistics and financial control. But after French objections, talks were postponed on a third important topic - economic and monetary

Pakistan's internal security issue

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LAHORE, the cultural and posh city with Mogul heritage, witnessed a harrowing car bomb attack of a police station and the local headquarters of Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) agency on 27 May 2009. This is more than the seventh major attack on the city since January 2008 - and the third since March 2009, when the Sri Lankan cricket team and a police academy were targeted. The bomb, which killed twenty-seven people and injured over a hundred, is a further sign of the systemic, interrelated and deep-rooted nature of Pakistan's internal-security troubles.

The link between the Lahore bombing and the twin attacks that followed in Peshawar on 28 May, which killed eleven people and injured dozens more, and what is happening in Swat is not yet clear, but Islamist militants in western Pakistan had threatened attacks across the country in response to the army's operations in the NWFP. What is clear, though, is that those operations are massive and lasting and are having huge human outcomes.

A United Nations source has estimated the flow of internal refugees since mid-May 2009 as 2.4 million people; by 29 May, the UN Children's Fund (Unicef) calculated the figure exceeded 3 million.

There are few examples of such vast and sudden movements in recent history; the scale of what is happening recalls the traumatic events before the independence of Bangladesh in 1970-71, when many millions of people fled from the Pakistani army across the border into India.

Much of the destruction in Swat is because the Pakistani army is simply not made up for counter-insurgency or counter-guerrilla warfare and the conflict in Swat is a combination of this with an out-and-out civil war.

Pakistan has a standing army of 550,000, equipped with nearly 2,500 main battle-tanks and over 4,000 artillery pieces, five times the size of the British army. That may be large by any standards; but the "threat" from India has long dominated the Pakistani military posture, and India commands well over a million troops, 4,000 tanks and more than 10,000 artillery pieces.

What is essentially a powerful land army geared to armoured battles and artillery bombardments on the plains of south Asia is now engaged in a war against its own people in a bitter internal conflict that is being conducted under a blanket of tight media control. Because

of this, every impression is being given of a successful campaign against weak opponents - the Taliban - who are being put to flight. Where foreign journalists can report at all, they do so under tight army control and the rare visits they are able to make are to towns that are firmly under the army's control (see Shaun Gregory, "Pakistan and the 'AfPak' strategy", 28 May 2009).

Even so, two issues are emerging. One is that the assault will be prolonged and violent. The army is readily using its huge firepower advantage, but the militias that it is trying to defeat are proving resilient. Even army sources now speak of "steady progress amid stiff resistance" and recognise the war has some time to run (see Robert Birsell, "Bombs seen stiffening Pakistan resolve on militants", Reuters, 29 May 2009).

In Mingora, for example, there has been intensive street-fighting, yet the government security forces have gained control of just one quarter of the urban area. More generally, the militias are now avoiding conflict in exposed places and are moving to towns and villages across the valley. The army in response is using helicopter gunship, strike-aircraft and artillery, whose main effect is widespread destruction including the wholesale flattening of villages.

The second issue follows: the serious humanitarian effects (both short- and long-term) of the conflict. The United Nations estimates that \$450 million is needed for immediate aid to respond to exceptional displacement of people.

An indication of Washington's concerns over the situation is the decision on 22 May to make an immediate commitment of \$110 million in humanitarian aid. But this will barely touch the larger problem that many thousands of civilians were caught up in the fighting and prevented by a Pakistani army curfew from escaping the conflict-zone. Also on 22 May, the United Nations and several partner agencies launched an appeal for \$543 million in aid; but by 28 May, the "humanitarian action plan" had reached only 21% of this total.

A leading Islamabad newspaper cites a report from Human Rights Watch's Asia director, Brad Adams: "Reports of civilians killed in the crossfire continued to flood in...as people break the curfew in desperate bids to find food and water for their families, or try and escape the aerial and ground bombardments" (see "Trapped civilians face catastrophe in Swat", Dawn, 26 May 2009).

The surge of over 2 million refugees who have fled from the area has overwhelmed the Pakistani government and may be early signals of that.

agencies: "The true dimensions of the refugee problem are apparent in Mardan, one of the primary destinations for civilians fleeing the battles in Swat and in neighbouring Buner and Dir. The city is studded with refugee camps consisting of endless rows of tan canvas tents that bake under the 110-degree skies. Schools are packed to capacity with families sleeping on concrete classroom floors, with each classroom housing 40 or more people" (see Griff Witte, "Pakistan Refugee Crisis Poses Peril", Washington Post, 25 May 2009).

Only a small proportion of these refugees - 20% according to Save the Children - is housed in government camps. Most are living outside them; half of the displaced are children.

The inability to cope with a crisis caused by its own military action means that Pakistan's government is giving up influence to others (radical groups in particular) that are quick to fill the vacuum: "The army has warned that some Taliban fighters joined the fleeing residents and may have infiltrated the refugee camps... Outside the camps, radical Islamist agendas are rushing in to fill the void left by the paucity of government services. The Falah-e-Insaniyat foundation, the successor to a group known as Jamaat-ud-Dawa, has established a major presence near Swat, feeding tens of thousands of displaced people and providing them with quality medical care" (see "Foundation provides food to 275,000 IDPs", The News, 17 May 2009).

In the longer term there are signs the physical damage done to settlements will take years to repair. Qamar Zaman Kaira, Pakistan's information minister, said the authorities had started "early satellite surveys for rehabilitating homes, businesses and cultivable lands". The very fact the destruction demands satellite surveys gives some signal of the impact of the war after barely two weeks.

The war in northwest Pakistan may still be in its early stages, but it is already working with an intensity that is not fully understood beyond the region. Pakistani army sources are presenting the operation as an extensive and determined effort to isolate a relatively small group of extremist militias.

But three reasons - the failure to cope with refugees, the ability of the militias to disperse, and the rapid provision of aid by radical movements - suggests the long-term effects of the army's campaign could be to intensify Pakistan's divisions. The Lahore bombing and Peshawar attacks may be early signals of that.

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vote matters in September."

The softening stance of Germany differs from that of several European countries (France, the Netherlands and Austria). According to the first poll conducted among Germany's Turks, more than 55% per cent of Turkish voters would opt now for Social Democrats if