US bombing in northern Pakistan: an act of imperialist recklessness

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The US air strike carried out on January 13 on the isolated village of Damadola, near Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, was as reckless as it was criminal. At least 18 civilians were killed, including five women and five children, further inflaming already high political and social tensions inside Pakistan.

Under international law, the strike was an act of war. The Pakistani government of President Pervez Musharraf has collaborated with the US takeover of Afghanistan and its broader international aggression, but it has never formally granted the US military the right to cross the border and carry out operations on Pakistani soil or airspace. It is unclear whether the Pakistani government and military had pre-knowledge of the attack. But in the face of public outrage it has been compelled to issue a protest to the US ambassador and deplore the bombing of Damadola as "highly condemnable".

Not only was the attack a violation of Pakistani national sovereignty, the intended target—the senior Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri—was not even in the village. Haroon Rashid, the local member of the Pakistani National Assembly, told *Afghan Islamic Press*: "I know all the 18 people who were killed. There was neither al-Zawahiri nor any other Arab among them. Rather they were all poor people of the area." A Pakistani military intelligence officer told Al Jazeerah: "Their [the US military] information was wrong, and our investigations conclude that they acted on false information."

To this point, the Bush administration has not issued a statement on the attack, despite the fact that innocent civilians were slaughtered and a formal protest issued by the Musharraf regime. Various unnamed US officials, however, have told the press that American intelligence agencies believed that al-Zawahari was sleeping in one of the three homes that were reduced to rubble. The *New York Times* reported that the attack was thought to have been carried out by CIA-operated unmanned Predator drone aircraft, which flew into Pakistani territory from Afghanistan.

The air strike was the second US intrusion into the country within one week. On January 7, at least eight people were killed in an attack by US helicopters on a house in North Waziristan, another mountainous border region some 300 kilometres to the south of Damadola.

The imperialist arrogance and outright gangsterism of the Bush administration has provoked demonstrations across Pakistan. In the region surrounding Damadola, up to 8,000 local tribesmen gathered on Saturday to denounce the raid and Musharraf's alliance with the Bush administration. Tribesmen chanted "Death to America", "Death to Bush" and "A friend of America is a traitor"—a reference to the Pakistan government. Later in the day, demonstrators set fire to the offices of Associated Development Construction, an organisation financed by the US Agency for International Development. Riot police and troops fired tear gas and bullets in the air to disperse the crowd. Further protests were held on Sunday and were planned for today in the area.

Some 10,000 people rallied in Karachi yesterday, chanting "Death to American aggression". Smaller protests took place in a number of other cities and towns. A coalition of Islamic parties, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, has called for Musharraf to step down as president. A coalition leader, Ghafoor Ahmed, belligerently declared: "The army cannot defend the country under his leadership". In an indication of the depth of feeling following the bombing, the Mutihada Qaumi Movement, which holds several ministries in Musharraf's cabinet, took part in the anti-US and anti-

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government demonstrations.

On Sunday evening, Musharraf was forced to make a nation-wide television address. He defended his collaboration with US foreign policy on the grounds it was preventing open US aggression against Pakistan. In a grovelling display, he appealed to the ethnic Pashtun tribes in the border regions of Pakistan, which share cultural and linguistic ties with Afghani Pashtuns, to cease supporting the guerilla resistance against the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. Musharraf declared: “If we keep sheltering foreign terrorists here... our future will not be good.”

The US military alleges that large numbers of Al Qaeda fighters and Taliban supporters are taking refuge in the mountainous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and using it as a base to launch attacks on American-led forces. The number of attacks on the US-led forces is steadily increasing and the number of US and allied fatalities more than doubled in 2005 to 129.

Under pressure from Washington, Musharraf has deployed 70,000 troops along the Afghan border, provoking tensions with the fiercely independent local tribes and rifts within the Pakistani military, sections of which are hostile to the US presence in the region. He now faces, however, burgeoning opposition demanding that Pakistan distance itself from the Bush administration and cease assisting US operations in Afghanistan.

In response to the protests in Pakistan, US congressmen shamelessly defended the right of the American military to bomb alleged Al Qaeda hideouts wherever and whenever it sees fit. The main consequence of such US actions is to provide fertile ground for Al Qaeda and other Islamist organisations to stoke up anti-Americanism and recruit to their ranks.

Republican Senator Trent Lott declared on CNN on Sunday that he would “have a problem if we didn’t do it”. Democrat Senator Evan Bayh told CNN that the “real problem” was not the death of innocent civilians, but the security situation on the Pakistani border. “It’s a regrettable situation”, he declared, “but what else are we supposed to do? It’s like the wild, wild west out there... So this kind of thing is what we’re left with.”

Republican Senator John McCain, a possible presidential contender, bluntly stated: “We understand the anger that people feel, but the United States’ priorities are to get rid of Al Qaeda, and this was an effort to do so. We apologise, but I can’t tell you that we wouldn’t do the same thing again.”

With such a mentality in Washington, and with the Bush administration alleging that Al Qaeda cells exist in dozens of countries, nowhere can be considered immune from US strikes.

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