Pakistan: anger mounts against Musharraf in wake of US air strike

James Cogan
19 January 2006

Outrage in Pakistan over the US air strike on the border village of Damadola, which killed as many as 18 men, women and children, has been aggravated by the reaction in Washington.

The Bush administration has treated the widespread protests in Pakistan with contempt, refusing either to confirm or deny that the US was responsible for the attack. The White House has also ignored high-level Pakistani demands for a formal apology. At the same time, both Republican and Democrat congressmen have upheld the self-declared right of the US to violate Pakistan's national sovereignty and carry out military operations on its territory in the name of the "war on terrorism".

In the early hours of January 13, US aircraft fired as many as 10 Hellfire missiles into three houses in Damadola, located well inside Pakistan, some six kilometres from the Afghan border. Information had allegedly been received that the main spokesman for Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahari, would be in the village for a feast to celebrate the end of the Muslim festival of Eid.

Pakistani intelligence sources and politicians have declared that the US information was wrong. Zawahiri was not in Damadola. According to the BBC, the destroyed houses belonged to local jewellers—a low-status occupation in tribal society and therefore unlikely hosts of senior Al Qaeda leaders. Among those killed by the missiles were at least five women and five children.

While there are conflicting reports, it appears likely that a small group of Islamist fighters from Afghanistan was in the village. In the border regions of Pakistan, where the local Pashtun population shares a common culture and language with the tribes of southern Afghanistan, that is far from uncommon. Large numbers of Al Qaeda members and supporters of the former Taliban regime are believed to have sought refuge in the mountainous Pakistan frontier areas following the November 2001 US invasion—in the same way as CIA-backed Afghan guerillas did during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

Regardless of who was in Damadola, the motive for the US attack inside Pakistan is obvious—short-term political expediency. Pakistan has never formally granted the America military the right to carry out any operations on its territory—either "hot pursuits" over the border or the type of attempted assassination carried out last week. If successful, the killing of Zawahiri would have been used to divert public attention in the US from the corruption scandals engulfing the Bush administration, the quagmire in Iraq and the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan.

Far from declining since national elections in September, the scale of violence in Afghanistan against the US-led occupation forces is escalating. In the past four months, there have been 25 suicide bombings, as well as dozens of clashes. This week, a Canadian diplomat was killed and three Canadian soldiers wounded when a suicide bomber attacked their convoy.

In Spin Boldak—on the Pakistani border—a man riding a motorbike detonated a bomb at a wrestling match on January 16, killing and wounding as many as 50 people. While the Taliban denied responsibility for the indiscriminate bombing, a spokesman Mullah Dadullah claimed on Tuesday that "hundreds of Afghan Taliban *mujahideen* are ready for suicide attacks" and "present in all cities". Both the Bush administration and Afghan government allege that the suicide bombers are coming into the country from camps inside Pakistan.

According to the Pakistani prime minister and the ambassador to the US, Islamabad was not informed of

© World Socialist Web Site

the attack on Damadola—although unnamed Pakistani and US intelligence sources cited in the *Washington Post* claimed it was. The US attack is the second violation of Pakistani sovereignty this year. On January 8, US helicopters fired missiles into a cleric's house in North Waziristan—another Pashtun region bordering Afghanistan—killing at least eight people.

The utter indifference of the White House and the Pentagon toward growing anti-US opposition in Pakistan has created a major crisis for the pro-US regime of President Pervez Musharraf.

Throughout Pakistan, there is widespread sympathy for the Afghan and Iraqi people and hostility toward Musharraf's collaboration with US imperialism. Under pressure from Washington, the government has deployed 70,000 Pakistani troops in the traditionally autonomous border regions to stop the movement of fighters back and forth between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In response to the US attack, anti-US and anti-government demonstrations took place on the weekend in numerous cities across Pakistan. On Monday, hundreds of students protested in Karachi, chanting "Down with America" and "Musharraf is a traitor".

In the Pakistani parliament on Tuesday, the opposition Islamist coalition—the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA)—called for the government's resignation for "failing to protect its people". While a no-confidence motion was defeated, members of the Musharraf's own coalition joined with the MMA to virulently denounce the air strike.

The newspaper *Dawn* reported that the MMA insisted on a resolution demanding the recall of Pakistan's ambassador to the US, an unconditional US apology and compensation for the villagers affected. It also called on the Musharraf regime to take the matter to the UN if Washington refused. While the government indicated that Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz would raise matter during his trip to Washington scheduled to begin the following day, MMA leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed demanded that the visit be cancelled and declared that Musharraf was "playing with fire" by supporting US foreign policy.

Musharraf and his government have heightened the public anger with their mild condemnations of the air strike. Aziz has referred to it as "an unfortunate event", while at the same time denouncing the border tribes for supporting "foreign terrorists" and reassuring Washington of his government's continuing loyalty. Musharraf himself has not publicly condemned the air strike. In a 90-minute television address on Tuesday evening, he did not even mention the attack—a fact that provoked surprised comment even in the US press.

The main threat facing Musharraf is not the campaign of the parliamentary opposition, however. He faces the prospect of open warfare breaking out with the Pashtun frontier tribes, along with an escalating conflict with ethnic Baloch separatists in the south-west border region of Balochistan.

More than 10,000 tribesmen, many carrying arms, gathered on Saturday near Damadola and local leaders issued demands for the withdrawal of Pakistani troops from the area. Already there has been a rapid surge in violence in North Waziristan following the January 7 US helicopter attack. More than 43 people have been killed in clashes between troops and militants after the government refused to pull out its security forces.

The air strike ordered by the Bush administration on January 13 failed to kill any Al Qaeda leader. It has, however, triggered bitter opposition inside Pakistan that may yet claim the political scalp of American ally Musharraf.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site