

US military bombards targets inside Pakistan

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In an aggressive new step, the US military shelled and destroyed targets across the Afghan border inside Pakistan on Sunday. While it has received scant coverage in the American and international media, the attack foreshadows more extensive US cross-border operations that have the potential to further destabilise Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's uncertain grip on power.

The US-led coalition in Afghanistan issued a statement declaring that Pakistan had given permission for an attack on Taliban positions inside its borders. Occupation forces in the eastern province of Paktika used artillery and mortar fire to destroy six positions—three inside Afghanistan, and three across the border in Pakistan. According to the statement, at least 12 insurgents were killed in the barrage.

Pakistani officials emphatically denied giving approval for the assault. Military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad declared, "There was no attack [from Pakistan], no firing from our side of the border. And there was no permission asked by them or given by us." Pakistani Foreign Office spokesperson Tasnim Aslam dismissed further US claims that Washington had an understanding with Islamabad to allow cross-border attacks as "speculative and fabricated".

Late Monday, the US military belatedly conceded that no permission had been given. "We regret the miscommunications in this event," Brigadier General Joseph Votel, deputy commander of NATO's eastern region, declared. However, he made no apology for the attack itself and gave no guarantee that US forces would not engage in further cross-border attacks.

The incident follows a series of statements by Bush administration officials indicating that the US military would take unilateral action inside Pakistan against Taliban and Al Qaeda targets. Late last month, Bush's Homeland Security Adviser Frances Townsend was

asked on Fox News why the US was not sending predator drones and special forces into Pakistan. "Well, just because we don't speak about things publicly doesn't mean we're not doing many of the things you're talking about," she replied.

During a press conference earlier this month, President Bush dodged a question about seeking Pakistani approval before sending in US troops. While noting the Pakistani president's past cooperation and shared concerns about "terrorism", Bush stressed: "I'm confident, with real actionable intelligence, we will get the job done." US and Afghan officials had been demanding for months that Musharraf take tougher action against anti-US insurgents based in Pakistan's tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan.

There is no doubt that the US military has already taken action inside Pakistan. An Associated Press report published last week revealed that, as early as 2004, the rules of engagement for elite US special forces had authorised "hot pursuit" of anti-occupation fighters into Pakistan without seeking prior approval from Islamabad. The documents laid out circumstances in which US troops could penetrate up to 10 kilometres into Pakistani territory. Pakistani villagers have protested on a number of occasions against US incursions and attacks, including aerial bombings.

To date, the Bush administration has played down cross-border operations to minimise the political fallout for Musharraf, who confronts widespread domestic opposition over his support for the US occupation of Afghanistan and the bogus "war on terror". For its part, the Pakistani regime has trod a fine line: publicly insisting that the US military observe its borders, while collaborating closely behind the scenes. The Associated Press article reported that the US military had established a liaison office in Islamabad that was responsible for notifying local authorities of US incursions into Pakistan.

US demands for tougher Pakistani action against Islamist militants have made Musharraf's position even more precarious. Last month's bloody end to the siege of Islamabad's Red Mosque, or Lal Masjid, in which more than 100 people were killed, provoked widespread revulsion, denunciations of Musharraf as an American stooge and calls for his ousting. Attacks on Pakistani security forces by Islamic extremists have sharply escalated, with clashes taking place on a daily basis in tribal border areas. Major General Arshad told the media last Friday that around 250 militants and 60 troops had died over the previous month, including in suicide attacks on soldiers and police.

Musharraf is also facing concerted pressure from the major opposition parties. Exiled former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted by Musharraf in a military coup in 1999, declared he would contest national elections after the country's Supreme Court ruled last week that there was no barrier to his return. Another exiled former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, has engaged in talks with Musharraf to reach an arrangement that would enable her to return and take part in elections.

Musharraf is confronting growing demands to step aside as the country's military commander if he seeks re-election as president. In the first sign of overt opposition in his own administration, one of Musharraf's cabinet ministers resigned on Monday and called for him to step down as head of the army. The dilemma for the increasingly beleaguered military strongman is that the army will only remain as a secure base of support if he stays at its head. The fighting in border areas has already opened up rifts in the army, which has had close ties to Islamist groups, includes significant numbers of Pashtuns, and previously backed the Taliban in Pashtun areas of Afghanistan.

US cross-border attacks into Pakistan will only compound Musharraf's political problems. While the clash on Sunday has been minimised, Washington has not ruled out further attacks. Faced with a deteriorating military situation in Afghanistan and the contorted logic of his "war on terror", President Bush is under pressure to act against so-called Al Qaeda sanctuaries. Earlier this month, Democratic presidential contender Barack Obama publicly called for US troops to move against Al Qaeda forces inside Pakistan—with or without Islamabad's approval.

Inside Afghanistan, US and coalition troops are confronting a rising tide of attacks by insurgents as well as widespread popular opposition to the five years of occupation, which has brought nothing but death and destruction to large parts of the country. Another five foreign troops died in fighting on Monday, taking the death toll for the year to more than 150. The 2007 figure is set to pass last year's toll of more than 190—the highest since the 2001 invasion.

Last Sunday's attack on alleged Taliban positions inside Pakistan may indicate the start of more aggressive US interventions, regardless of the impact on the country's stability. One of the first casualties of such American action could well be Musharraf, who has been an important ally in legitimising and prosecuting the Bush administration's "war on terror".



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