

Another US strike inside Pakistan's border region

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An air strike on Sunday on a compound in the Pakistani tribal area of South Waziristan that borders Afghanistan has left up to 20 people dead. While Washington has not acknowledged responsibility, there is little doubt that the US military or the CIA carried out the attack as part of a widening covert war against anti-American militants entrenched in the Pakistani border areas.

Up to seven missiles or bombs flattened the compound just south of the regional centre of Wana at around 3 p.m. "When I heard the explosions, I rushed to the place where it happened. I saw dead bodies scattered everywhere," a villager Aziz Ullah Wazir told the *Washington Post*. Local residents and officials claimed that the house belonged to a Taliban sympathiser, Noorullah Wazir, and was frequented by "Arabs"—the term used to denote foreign supporters of the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Veteran journalist Sailab Masood told the *Guardian*, however, that local tribesmen were angry that innocent civilians had been killed.

Details of the attack are scanty. According to the *New York Times*, villagers said a B-52 bomber carried out the raid. Other reports cite locals who claim to have heard the sound of a US Predator drone—an unmanned surveillance vehicle that has been used in previous attacks inside Pakistan. The Pakistani military acknowledged that the blasts had occurred, but pointedly refused to identify the attackers, saying only that the army had no operations in the area.

Both Washington and Islamabad are deliberately playing down the attack, which will only further fuel anger at Pakistan's support for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. President Pervez Musharraf's involvement in the Bush administration's bogus "war on terrorism" and tacit approval of US operations

inside Pakistan were a major factor in generating opposition to his regime.

The issue remains highly sensitive as the winners of last month's elections—the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)—prepare to form a government. Whatever their limited criticisms of US militarism during the campaign, both parties have a long record of supporting Pakistan's alliance with Washington and collaborating with the US military. Significantly, neither party has protested against the latest missile strike, an indication that the new government, like Musharraf, will acquiesce to US strikes in the tribal areas.

There are many signs that the Bush administration has expanded covert operations inside Pakistan since the beginning of the year. In early January, the *New York Times* reported that a top-level White House meeting, involving Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley and other senior officials, discussed in detail "far more aggressive covert operations" inside Pakistani border areas.

"The new operations for expanded covert operations include loosening restrictions on the CIA to strike selected targets in Pakistan, in some cases using intelligence provided by Pakistani sources, officials said. Most counter terrorism operations in Pakistan have been conducted by the CIA... [I]f the CIA were given broader authority, it could call for help from the military or deputise some forces of the Special Operations Command to act under the authority of the agency," the article stated.

While the *New York Times* claimed that no decisions were taken at the January meeting, another article last month reported that the CIA had established a base inside Pakistan. "Among other things, the new

arrangements allowed an increase in the number and scope of patrols and strikes by armed Predator surveillance aircraft launched from a secret base in Pakistan—a far more aggressive strategy to attack Al Qaeda and the Taliban than had existed before,” the *Times* explained.

In its report of Sunday’s strike, the *Times* noted that Mike McConnell, director of national intelligence and General Michael Hayden, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, reached an agreement in January with the new Pakistani army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, to allow the US greater freedom to strike targets in the tribal areas without specific permission from the Pakistani Army. The article claimed that the US was receiving “better on-the-ground human intelligence” by providing “large cash payments to tribesmen”.

There has been a marked increase in visits to Pakistan this year by senior American military officers, including two by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen. During his latest visit on March 4, Admiral Mullen discussed US assistance to expand Pakistan’s Frontier Corps to a force of around 85,000 recruited from tribesmen in the border areas. The Pentagon has already spent around \$25 million to provide the Frontier Corps with equipment, including vehicles, radios and surveillance devices, and plans to spend another \$75 million over the next year.

At least two other US aerial attacks have taken place inside Pakistan this year. On January 29, a missile destroyed a compound in the village of Khushali Torikhel in North Waziristan, killing 13 people. US and Pakistani officials claimed that Abu Laith al-Libi, a senior Al Qaeda commander, was among the dead. On February 28, a missile strike destroyed an alleged Taliban safe house in the village of Kaloosha in South Waziristan, killing at least 10 people. A local tribal leader told the *Washington Post* that women and children were among the dead, and that at least six others were injured.

It is not possible to confirm the identity of the victims of these attacks. In neighbouring Afghanistan, US officials routinely brand the casualties of US operations as “Taliban” and “Al Qaeda” and deny civilian deaths even in cases where locals have provided clear evidence to the contrary. On-the-ground intelligence provided by paid informants is often unreliable and

coloured by local rivalries and animosities. Claims about the outcome of US strikes inside Pakistan are undoubtedly just as uncertain.

Other attacks on targets within Pakistan are taking place from US bases inside Afghanistan. Pakistani officials lodged a formal complaint with the US military after artillery fire from Afghanistan hit a house in North Waziristan last Wednesday, killing two women and two children. According to the Pakistani-based *News*, last Friday four missiles fell on the village of Botraki, just inside the Pakistani border.

The extent of Washington’s covert war inside Pakistan remains unclear, but such operations are fuelling widespread anger and provoking a rising number of suicide bombings and attacks on Pakistani security forces and other targets. Last Saturday, a bomb blast at a restaurant in Islamabad popular with foreigners killed a Turkish woman and wounded at least 10 others, including five American officials, two Japanese journalists and a British police officer. Four of the five Americans were FBI agents operating in Pakistan.

The escalation of US operations can only have a profoundly destabilising impact, not just in the border regions, but throughout Pakistan, which is already wracked by deep political crisis. While the PPP and PML-N won a decisive victory in last month’s election, in part because of their criticism of Musharraf’s collaboration with the US, the mood will quickly turn as the new government seeks to maintain the US alliance amid ongoing American strikes on Pakistani soil.



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