

# US continues to defend air strike on Pakistani military post

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The US government and military have rebuffed Pakistani government protests over Tuesday night's aerial bombardment of a Pakistani security checkpoint in the Mohmand region in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). Ostensibly aimed at pro-Taliban insurgents, the US attack, which was carried out by two F-15s and a B-1 bomber, killed 11 Pakistani Frontier Corps troops, including a major, and injured 10, including 3 civilians.

The Pakistani government termed the attack "completely unprovoked and cowardly," adding that it "hit at the very basis" of US-Pakistani cooperation in the "war on terror." Pakistani military spokesman Major General Athar Abbas rejected Pentagon claims that Islamabad had been informed in advance of a US-Afghan operation in the area. "We believe it was a deliberate act of aggression," he declared.

The Bush administration and Pentagon have responded with a chorus of statements justifying the attack.

Admiral Michael Mullen, the head of the US Armed Forces' Joint Chiefs of Staff, defended the attack mounted by Afghan forces with US air support along the Afghan-Pakistani border Tuesday night saying it went according to the "book". "Every indication I have is that this operation was executed in accordance with procedures—by the book—that's what I know now".

While the State Department did express, in formulaic fashion, "regrets" over the "reported loss of Pakistani life," Washington continues to insist it has no confirmation that US warplanes bombed a Pakistani military checkpoint. White House National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley said US officials "have not been able to corroborate" that American bombs killed Pakistani troops. "Should it be true, obviously we would be very saddened by that loss"

On Thursday the Pentagon released video footage meant to substantiate its claim that the US launched air strikes to attack "anti-Afghan government insurgents" who had engaged Afghan forces.

The grainy footage, reputedly taken from the air by a surveillance drone, is a patent piece of propaganda. Less than two minutes long, it reputedly shows a small group of 5

to 7 insurgents poised on the Pakistani-Afghan border. They are hit by US "precision-guided munitions" after allegedly firing at Afghan troops in Afghanistan's eastern Kunar province. An unnamed Pentagon propagandist narrates the video. Near the end of the brief footage he declares, "It is clear there are no structures or [Pakistani] outposts in the impact area."

During the video, two bombs are seen to strike and a third, the narrator explains, was dropped beyond the range of the drone's camera. The US military, however, admits to dropping a dozen or more explosives, most of them 500-pound bombs. Nothing is said of the nine or more other bombs.

A report filed by an Agence-France Presse journalist who visited the Pakistani military outpost at Gora Thursday paints a horrific picture of the destruction wrought by the US air strikes. He saw a six-foot crater in close proximity to the checkpoint. "The structure itself," says the report, "was badly damaged while some nearby trees were burned to a crisp." Local people were still removing pieces of flesh from the area.

Witnesses told the reporter that the US forces had deliberately targeted the military checkpoint. Several local residents who rushed to assist the Pakistani soldiers after they had been bombed were hit by further US air strikes. "This is tyrannical," said the uncle of an 18 year-old civilian wounded by the US attack. "The government should retaliate. The [US-led] coalition says they attacked miscreants. So are the Pakistan soldiers miscreants. Why did they kill them?"

The dismissive and aggressive US response to Pakistan's protests over the killing of Pakistani troops at Gora is meant to send a clear message to the new Pakistan People's Party-led coalition government: Washington is determined to see support for the Taliban insurgency in Pakistan crushed with or without the cooperation of Islamabad and will not let international law and state sovereignty stand in its way.

The new government has sought to defuse the mounting anti-government insurgency in FATA and the North-West

Frontier Province (NWFP). This insurgency was triggered by the Pakistani military's invasion of the traditionally autonomous FATA region, at US behest, beginning in 2004, and by popular opposition to the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan. In combating the insurgency, the Pakistani government has used colonial-style tactics, including collective punishments and disappearances. Not only has this further alienated the local populace, but mounting military casualties and Pashtun-nationalist sentiment have seriously eroded military morale and discipline.

The Bush administration, the Pentagon and NATO have all vigorously opposed the new Pakistani government's attempt to reach a negotiated settlement to the FATA insurgency, for it cuts across their attempts to shore up the increasingly unpopular government of Hamid Karzai in Kabul. US and NATO officials have claimed that the truces between the Pakistani government and various Islamic militia in FATA and the Swat Valley region of the NWFP have resulted in a surge in Taliban attacks in Afghanistan.

Recent months have seen a parade of Pentagon officials visit Islamabad in order to press the Pakistani government and military to give US military and security forces greater freedom to mount air strikes in Pakistan and even to send troops into the country from across the border in Afghanistan. (It recently emerged that the US already has a CIA base at a secret location in Pakistan from which it can and has launched predatory drones.)

Meanwhile, the issue of US military action in Pakistan has repeatedly been raised in the US presidential campaign, with the presumptive Democratic Party nominee, Barack Obama, taking the lead in proclaiming his readiness to order military action in Pakistan, with or without the cooperation of Islamabad.

There have also been increasing frictions between Pakistan's new government and the Bush administration over the fate of Washington's long-time close ally, the president and former military strongman General Pervez Musharraf. The Bush administration has been pressing the new government not to impeach or otherwise challenge Musharraf, although he led a brutal, illegal dictatorship for nine years and constitutionally retains huge powers.

The US is seeking to use the loss of life at Gora to ratchet up its campaign for closer collaboration between Washington, Islamabad and Kabul in suppressing the Taliban insurgency. "This is a reminder," declared State Department spokesman Gonzalo Gallegos, "that better cross-border communications between forces is vital. . . . We are sure that military on both sides will look into the matter and review how to prevent recurrence and how to prevent extremists from using this area."

Seth Jones, an analyst from the Washington think tank

Rand Corporation, speaking to ABC in Washington, warned of more American attacks in Pakistan's FATA region, claiming that Taliban and Al Qaeda militants are becoming more entrenched there. "[E]vidence over the past few years," said Jones, "strongly suggests that the Pakistan army and some of its other security services, including the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, the ISI, have targeted foreign fighters including Uzbeks and Arabs but have been much more reluctant to target local groups, local Pashtun groups, groups that are fighting in Afghanistan or in India including on the Kashmir front."

He then added, "If the Pakistan government is unwilling or unable to do it I think it creates a strong impetus for somebody else, including in this case the Americans, to do it".

The Pakistani government, for its part, has backed off from its initial strong condemnation of the US air strike at Gora. The Pakistani ambassador to the US is calling not for a US apology, let alone action against those responsible for ordering the bombing strike, but rather for a joint US-Pakistani inquiry into the incident. Speaking on a US radio program Ambassador Husain Haqqani responded defensively when presenter Michael Rowland suggested that the "Pakistani military is not doing nearly enough to root the militants out." Haqqani said, "I think we can rectify those mistakes if we work together, but nothing will be accomplished if we finger point or use force against one another."

The US military's killing of Pakistan soldiers and civilians at Gora will further fuel opposition to Washington, which is rightly reviled by large sections of the Pakistani people for its predatory wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and its support for a succession of military dictatorships in Islamabad. Expressing concern over the possibility of a further increase of anti-US sentiments in Pakistan, Rick Barton, a Pakistan expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a US think tank, warned that incidents like Tuesday's US air strike "could really be exploited as an organizing tool to get people back to thinking the United States is the root cause."



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