

US carries out more airstrikes in Pakistan

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In open contempt of the repeated protests by the Pakistani government, the US military carried out another two air strikes on October 31 against houses inside Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA), killing at least 27 people.

Last Wednesday, the government of Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani issued a formal protest to the US ambassador to Pakistan, Anne Patterson, over an air strike on October 26 that killed 15 people. According to Pakistani officials cited by the *New York Times*, Patterson was told "such attacks were a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and should be stopped immediately".

The US answer was given two days later. In the first attack, a remotely-controlled, unmanned Predator plane launched missiles into the home of a local cleric in the village of Asori, in the agency of North Waziristan. It then fired more missiles at a vehicle attempting to leave the scene. It is believed that 24 people died, including women and children. In unconfirmed reports, Pakistani officials have alleged that a senior Al Qaeda leader, Abdur Rehman, also known as Abu Akasha al Iraqi, was among the slain. As with all previous claims, no evidence has been presented.

The second Predator attack was carried out against a home near the town of Wana, in the agency of South Waziristan. The suspected target was the Pakistani Taliban leader Maulvi Nazir, who is believed to have close relations with Afghan Taliban militants who are fighting against the US-led occupation. Nazir reportedly escaped with only minor injuries, but three other people were killed.

The air strikes were the latest in an escalating campaign of attacks into Pakistan. As many as 20 air strikes and one ground incursion have been carried out in the past two months.

The Pakistani prime minister on one occasion

denounced the US operations as "acts of terrorism". It is not only suspected Al Qaeda or Taliban leaders who are being killed, but their wives, children, elderly parents and any other innocent civilians who happen to be in the vicinity of the houses that are being blown to pieces. The attacks are provoking mass outrage throughout the country and are fuelling support for Islamist organisations that are opposed to the civilian government and supporting the anti-US insurgency in Afghanistan.

The official position in Washington is to refuse to confirm or deny that US forces are responsible for the reported attacks.

The reality is that since July, the US military has had *carte blanche* from the Bush administration to order attacks that violate the sovereignty of Pakistan—an ostensible US ally. Previously, such operations had to be personally approved by the president. Now, the military head of Centcom (Central Command), which covers the Middle East and Central Asia, can unilaterally decide to launch an attack on alleged "terrorist havens".

Reports are now surfacing that any country, not only Pakistan, can be targeted under Bush's secret directive. On October 26, US special forces carried out an assault on the Syrian village of Abu Kamal—the first such incursion into Syria. Seven civilians were killed. The operation would have been ordered in close liaison with General David Petraeus, the former commander of US forces in Iraq and the favourite of the most militarist wing of the American ruling class. Petraeus assumed command of Centcom on the same day as the latest Pakistani airstrikes.

The US national security commentator Eli Lake, writing in the *New Republic* last Tuesday, reported that Bush had authorised Central Command to strike anywhere in its designated region. The only limitation is that Petraeus requires the approval of at least the

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to attack targets inside Iran—as the Iranian military theoretically has the capacity to strike back in the Western hemisphere.

If this is correct, the Bush directive has far-reaching implications. It means that Petraeus has the power to order unprovoked acts of war against nations throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, without even the knowledge of the incoming president, let alone a debate and vote in the US Congress.

Roger Cressey, a former aide to Richard Clarke, the chief counter terrorism advisor of the Clinton administration, told the *New Republic*: "The bar for military operations will be lowered because the downsides for the president are minimal."

According to Lake, other countries that could be targeted include Yemen, Kenya, Mali and Sudan—the last three are covered by the US military's newly inaugurated Africa Command.

Barack Obama, the Democratic Party presidential candidate and most likely victor in Tuesday's election, has made no public comment on either the raid into Syria or Friday's attack in Pakistan. The silence testifies to his consent. Throughout his campaign, Obama has declared his willingness to order unilateral attacks into Pakistan or other countries allegedly providing a safe haven to terrorists.

Lake commented in the *New Republic*: "His campaign rhetoric has now become the official war policy he will inherit." Any administration Obama heads would not only boost the number of US troops in Afghanistan, but intensify the operations over the border.



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