

US missiles strike deeper inside Pakistan

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Missiles launched from an unmanned US drone killed at least five people on Wednesday in the Pakistani village of Indi Khel. The attack is the first outside the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that border Afghanistan. The village is inside Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and about 50 kilometres from the Afghan border.

The provocative strike marks a further escalation of US operations against alleged Islamist militants inside Pakistan. By extending its targets beyond the semi-autonomous FATA region, Washington threatens to destabilise broader areas of the country. Since August, there have been at least 20 missile attacks inside the border areas that have intensified anti-US sentiment and hostility to the Pakistani government.

Unnamed US and Pakistani intelligence officials claim that all of those killed in the latest attack were Islamist militants connected to the armed resistance to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. A senior Pakistani military officer told the Associated Press that "the Americans are very confident" that a senior Al Qaeda member identified as Abdullah Azam Al-Saudi was among the dead.

However, local villagers and police said that a number of civilians were among the casualties. According to the *Daily Times*, the predawn attack killed at least two locals including Hakeem, the son of Dilbar Khan whose house was destroyed. The *New York Times* reported that four civilians, including a child, were injured and taken to the Mission Hospital in the nearby town of Bannu for treatment.

The missile strike has triggered angry denunciations inside Pakistan. Opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Ahsan Iqbal said: "Such attacks

are not only a defamation of the parliamentary resolution but a disgrace to the nation. The government is only recording a verbal protest and innocent citizens are being killed." In September, a unanimous parliamentary resolution demanded an end to US operations inside Pakistan.

Hafiz Gul Bahadur, a Pakistani Taliban leader based in North Waziristan, has warned that his militia will pull out of a ceasefire agreement with the Pakistani military if US missile strikes continue. A spokesman told the BBC that the organisation would retaliate against targets outside the FATA region.

Qazi Hussain Ahmed, head of the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami, threatened to mobilise protests to block the US supply route to Afghanistan if the drone attacks continued. At present, about 75 percent of US and NATO military supplies arrive at the Pakistani port of Karachi and are trucked by contractors through Pakistan and into Afghanistan via the Khyber agency. The route, which has increasingly been targetted by anti-US insurgents, was closed last week after a NATO convoy was attacked.

The Pakistani government is engaged in a precarious political balancing act. Under intense pressure from Washington, Islamabad has authorised a huge military offensive against Islamist militants in the FATA agency of Bajaur that has resulted in at least 1,500 deaths and driven an estimated 300,000 refugees from their homes. At the same time, however, the government is compelled to issue protests against the US missile strikes in an effort to placate widespread popular opposition.

A spokesman for President Asif Ali Zardari, Farhatullah Babar, described the missile strike as "a

great provocation" that would bring "a strong response from the government of Pakistan". Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani told the National Assembly that the attack was "intolerable". He also denied what is widely suspected—that the government has secretly agreed to the US strikes. The foreign ministry summoned US ambassador Anne Patterson yesterday to issue "a strong protest" and demand that the attacks be stopped.

The Pakistani government, however, is confronting a severe economic crisis and requires Washington's support to receive financial assistance. Beyond verbal protests, it has taken no action to retaliate against the blatant US flouting of Pakistani national sovereignty.

In fact, on the day of the latest missile strike, Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani was briefing NATO commanders in Brussels on military operations in the FATA region. Pakistani and US forces have been collaborating closely in preventing militants from escaping from Bajaur into Afghanistan.

Kayani urged a halt to US missile strikes inside Pakistan. At the same time, however, he gave a key undertaking to NATO to keep supply lines open through Pakistan into Afghanistan. Whether the promise can be kept in the face of mounting political opposition remains to be seen. The US military indicated this week that it has begun to seek alternative routes into landlocked Afghanistan via Central Asia or the Caucasus.

Facing criticism in parliament, Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani held out the vain hope that an Obama administration would end the missile strikes. "I think these things are happening because of this [US] transition period," he said, "I am sure when the government of Senator Obama is formed, attacks like these will be controlled." In fact, in the course of the US presidential campaign, Obama repeatedly made clear that he supported more extensive US military operations inside Pakistan.

There is an inexorable logic of the US actions. After the US began its attacks inside the FATA, the various Islamic militias began to seek new safe havens, prompting the US to now strike deeper inside Pakistani

territory. Step by step Pakistan is being drawn into Washington's reactionary war to secure its neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan as a base of operations for American economic and strategic interests throughout the broader region.



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