

Obama's new foreign policy team prepares escalated bloodletting in Afghanistan and Pakistan

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In a series of meetings and public appearances Wednesday and Thursday, and with the first military strikes of his administration, President Barack Obama has given a clear signal that he plans intensified bloodshed in Afghanistan and Pakistan as the US escalates its military intervention in Central and South Asia.

Missiles fired from unmanned Predator drones struck two targets inside Pakistan Friday morning, killing at least 18 people. As is always the case with such exercises in remote-controlled murder, US officials claimed they were targeting Al Qaeda, although even US media accounts admitted that the majority of those killed were local residents.

Three missiles struck the village of Zharki in North Waziristan, killing ten people, of whom five were described by US "security sources" as Al Qaeda militants. A few hours later, another missile hit a house in South Waziristan, killing eight people whose identities were not known.

The strikes were the latest in a series of more than two dozen such attacks since last August, and Pentagon officials said they had carried out the attacks under existing authority from the outgoing Bush administration, while keeping the new president fully informed of the action.

The death toll from the missile campaign, according to Pakistani government figures, numbers at least 263 people. Even US government officials claim only a handful of those killed had any ties to Al Qaeda or the Taliban.

The attacks on sovereign Pakistani territory are blatant violations of international law, which the regime in Islamabad protests verbally, while continuing to accept billions in US subsidies to the country's military.

Obama and his newly confirmed secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, staged what amounted to a political rally at the State Department Thursday, at which they announced the appointment of two new US pro-consuls to the region.

Former senator George Mitchell is to reprise his role from the Clinton administration as the US envoy to the Middle

East. Former UN Ambassador Richard Holbrooke is special US representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The different titles reflect different roles. Mitchell has been given responsibility for reviving and supervising negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, as well as between Israel and neighboring Arab states. His job is strictly diplomatic.

Holbrooke is to work with the US-backed regimes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as the US military command in Kabul, to coordinate joint action against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. He is not labeled an "envoy," according to the State Department, because he will have input into military policy as well as diplomacy, and because he will not be negotiating with the Taliban—a rebuff to pleas for such talks by Afghan President Hamid Karzai and some European countries.

Clinton called the two appointments "a loud and clear signal ... that our nation is once again capable of demonstrating global leadership." Obama said the two would "convey our seriousness of purpose" in both areas.

Mitchell chaired the negotiations in Northern Ireland that led to the 1998 Good Friday agreement, under which the IRA disarmed and Irish Republican politicians have joined the provincial government. He later chaired a commission on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict whose report, delivered in April 2001, was ignored by the incoming Bush administration because it called for a freeze on Israeli settlements on the West Bank.

Israeli officials, and particularly the right-wing Likud Party, which is favored to win the country's February 10 parliamentary elections, have openly expressed their distrust of Mitchell, who is partially of Lebanese-American ancestry (his mother was a Maronite Christian).

Mitchell's appointment cannot disguise the fundamental policy of US imperialism in the region, which makes use of the Zionist regime as its military spearhead against the Arab masses. Both Obama and Clinton, to whom Mitchell will

report, have made clear their support for the 24-day Israeli onslaught on Gaza, in which more than 1,300 Palestinians lost their lives, and over 5,000 were wounded.

The selection of Holbrooke is even more ominous, since he has long served as one of the most ruthless representatives of American imperialism, going all the way back to his early days in the Foreign Service in Vietnam. He came to public notice as the leader of the US diplomatic team at the 1995 talks on the crisis in the former Yugoslavia, held in Dayton, Ohio, that concluded with a US-imposed settlement in the civil war in Bosnia.

In his encouragement of ethnic cleansing by the Croatian regime of Franjo Tudjman, which drove a quarter million Serbs out of the Krajina region of southern Croatia in a 1995 offensive, Holbrooke could deservedly face war crimes charges. He later boasted, in his memoir of the Dayton talks: "Tudjman wanted clarification of the American position. He bluntly asked for my personal views. I indicated my general support for the offensive ... I told Tudjman the offensive had great value to the negotiations. It would be much easier to retain at the table what had been won on the battlefield than to get the Serbs to give up territory they had controlled for several years."

Holbrooke was fully aware at the time of the Dayton talks that the Croatian Army was carrying out atrocities against the Serbs, and was later quoted saying, "We 'hired' these guys to be our junkyard dogs because we were desperate. We need to try to 'control' them. But this is no time to get squeamish about things." He will now seek to find new "junkyard dogs" to do the dirty work of American imperialism in south and central Asia.

In his remarks at the State Department rally, Obama reiterated his concern over what he called a "deteriorating situation" in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, "a region that is 'the central front' of the struggle against terrorism. This language, echoing George W. Bush's description of Iraq, underscores the new administration's commitment to military subjugation of the Afghan population and wider attacks on the Pakistani population of the border region, largely Pushtun-speaking and linked by tribal ties to the majority Pushtun population in Afghanistan.

Clinton said that Holbrooke's mandate would be to "coordinate across the entire government an effort to achieve United States' strategic goals in the region." These goals have little to do with the remnants of Al Qaeda hiding out in the mountains along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The real focus of the intervention, under Obama as much as under Bush, is to establish the United States as the principal power in the oil-rich region of Central Asia.

The renewed focus on military problems in Afghanistan was signaled as well by Defense Secretary Robert Gates,

who has been retained in his position during the transition from Bush to Obama. He told a press conference Thursday that US goals in Afghanistan had been "too broad and too far into the future. We need more concrete goals that can be achieved realistically within three to five years, in terms of reestablishing control in certain areas, providing security for the population, going after al-Qaeda, preventing the reestablishment of terrorism."

There is mounting anxiety in the Pentagon over the viability of US supply lines to Afghanistan, especially if the force on the ground is doubled, as Obama plans. Two-thirds of US supplies go through Pakistan and convoys through the Khyber Pass to Afghanistan have come under repeated attacks. General David Petraeus, the former Iraq commander who was promoted to head the US Central Command, with responsibility for war planning throughout the region, recently completed a trip through Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, seeking agreements on expanding US supply shipments through those countries. He reported on his findings to the Obama White House on Wednesday.

According to a report in the *New York Times* January 22, another major concern of US military authorities in Afghanistan is the strengthening of Taliban influence in the southern provinces around Kandahar, patrolled now mainly by British, Canadian and Dutch troops, who are spread thinly through a vast area.

The *Times* reporter noted worriedly: "It is perhaps in Kandahar, one of the provincial capitals, where the lack of troops is most evident. About 3,000 Canadian soldiers are assigned to secure the city, home to about 500,000 people. In a recent visit, this reporter traveled the city for five days and did not see a single Canadian soldier on the streets. The lack of troops has allowed the Taliban to mount significant attacks inside the city."



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