Two US missile strikes in Pakistan in three days kill more than 60

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The United States on Monday carried out its second missile strike in three days inside Pakistan. More than 30 people were reported killed after four CIA Predator drone aircraft launched at least four Hellfire missiles at a purported Taliban training camp in Pakistan's northwest tribal area of Kurram.

It was the first US strike in Kurram, one of seven semi-autonomous tribal areas in Pakistan on the border with Afghanistan. Monday's attack followed a missile strike on Saturday on a building in the South Waziristan tribal district that killed at least 30 people.

The two strikes in rapid succession came within days of a visit to Pakistan by Richard Holbrooke, President Barack Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Holbrooke met last Wednesday with top Pakistani government and military officials in Lahore as part of a tour of the three countries whose principal aim is to prepare the way for an escalation of US military violence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Following Holbrooke's meeting with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Army Chief Gen. Ashfaq Kayani and other officials, the Pakistani daily *Dawn* reported that Holbrooke insisted that "the US wanted to see the tribal areas cleared of safe havens of Al Qaeda and the Taliban" and was prepared to "meet the military hardware needs of the country for counterinsurgency operations."

Pakistani officials reportedly reiterated their concerns over the US missile strikes in Pakistan aimed at wiping out Taliban and Al Qaeda "safe havens" in regions bordering Afghanistan. Since August, at least 38 such strikes have killed, according to conservative estimates, 130 Pakistani civilians, fueling popular opposition to both the US and the Pakistani government. While the Pakistani regime publicly opposes the strikes as a violation of Pakistani sovereignty, its military and intelligence agencies have supplied the CIA with intelligence and targeting information to facilitate the attacks.

The two most recent strikes, bringing the number since Obama took office to four, were a clear signal that the new administration intends to escalate the US military intervention in Pakistan, regardless of its destabilizing effect on the government in Islamabad. This is part of a broader plan to nearly double the US presence in Afghanistan to 60,000 troops over the next 18 months and to treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as part of a single military theater.

One indication of the advanced plans to widen the war into Pakistan was the statement last week by Senator Dianne Feinstein, the Democratic chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who said it was her understanding that US Predator drones "are flown out of a Pakistani base." Feinstein made the remark during a hearing with Obama's director of national intelligence, retired admiral Dennis C. Blair.

Blair refused to comment at the time. A spokesman for the Pakistani embassy in Washington denied the existence of such a base, saying, "There are no foreign bases in Pakistan." However, Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell, when asked at a news briefing about Feinstein's statement, did not deny the base's existence, saying only that he could not comment and had no knowledge of such a base.

Feinstein's office said she was referring to a March 27, 2007 report in the *Washington Post* that US drones targeting Pakistani tribal areas were launched from inside Afghanistan and "from bases near Islamabad and Jacobabad in Pakistan."

Prior US missile attacks have focused on alleged Al Qaeda and Taliban compounds in the tribal agencies of North and South Waziristan as well as in Bajaur. One strike took place in Bannu, a region outside of the tribal areas.

The increase in the number of US missile strikes into Pakistan is a measure of the worsening military security situation for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan as well as the growing power of anti-US and anti-government Islamist insurgents within Pakistan.

According to the *Long War Journal* web site, there were 36 recorded cross-border attacks in Pakistan during 2008. Of these, 29 took place after August 31. There were only ten

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recorded strikes in 2006 and 2007 combined.

The camp that was struck on Monday is located just 15 kilometers from the Afghan province of Khost. It is a holdover from the mujahideen guerrilla war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan that was financed and directed by the CIA on both sides of the border in the 1980s.

The US attack was evidently aimed at weakening Taliban forces in Kurram who have been conducting increasingly bold and effective attacks on the main US and NATO overland supply route from the Pakistani port of Karachi across the Khyber Pass in the northwest of the country and into Afghanistan.

Rehman Ullah, a resident of the targeted village of Baggan, said drones were seen in the sky before the attack and that he saw 30 bodies dug out of the rubble afterwards.

The US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, carried out to secure American domination of Central Asia, home to some of the richest oil and natural gas reserves in the world, has vastly destabilized the region and increased tensions between the US and rival powers, particularly Russia and China. After more than seven years of military violence and repression, the strength of insurgent opposition to the US occupation and Washington's puppet government in Kabul has grown, to the point where the Taliban, which was ousted from power by the US intervention in October 2001, controls large parts of Afghanistan.

Only days before Holbrooke arrived in Kabul for talks with President Hamid Karzai, coordinated attacks by Taliban guerrillas left at least 26 dead and 57 wounded in the heart of Kabul. The attacks exposed the fact that neither the Karzai government nor the 70,000 US and NATO troops that keep it in power are capable of maintaining security in virtually any part of the country, including the capital itself.

The Obama administration has signaled its growing displeasure with Karzai, who has issued frequent public criticisms of US air strikes that have killed hundreds of Afghan civilians. There is growing speculation that Washington may dispense with its puppet ruler and install someone new.

The security situation in Pakistan is likewise deteriorating. Islamist insurgents control large parts of the northwest tribal districts, and tensions between the US and Islamabad have mounted over the failure of the Pakistani military to wipe out the militants. In an extraordinary interview aired Sunday on the CBS television program "60 Minutes," Pakistani President Zardari said the Taliban had expanded its presence to a "huge amount" of Pakistan and were eying a takeover of the state. "We're fighting for the survival of Pakistan," he said.

One area that has come under Taliban control is the Swat Valley, once the home of a ski resort that attracted foreign tourists. In 2007 the Taliban launched an offensive and has since taken control of the region, which is part of Malakand in the North West Frontier Province.

Since last summer, some 12,000 Pakistani government troops have been carrying out fierce military operations in Swat against a Taliban force of about 3,000 fighters. But the government offensive has become bogged down and has failed to dislodge the Taliban.

On Monday, the regional government, with the support of President Zardari, announced that it was suspending military operations and conceding to the main demand of the Taliban in Swat—that Malakand come under Islamic, or Shariah, law. The move is widely seen as a defeat for the central government and a sign of weakness.

The United States has opposed previous attempts by Islamabad to establish a truce with Islamist insurgents and signaled its displeasure with the deal announced Monday, which flies in the face of Holbrooke's demand for an escalation of Pakistani military action against Islamist forces in the border regions.

"It's hard to view this as anything other than a negative development," a senior Defense Department official said on Monday. Speaking in India, Holbrooke did not specifically address the cease-fire agreement, but indicated Washington's opposition, saying the rise of the Taliban in Swat was a reminder that the US, Pakistan and India faced "an enemy which poses direct threats to our leadership, our capitals and our people."

This is coded language for a US military escalation that threatens to engulf all of Central Asia in a bloody conflagration.

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