

US missiles kill 24 in Pakistan

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US missiles fired from a Predator drone aircraft killed at least 24 people in Pakistan's northwest tribal area of Kurram Thursday evening. The American military attack came in the midst of an intense political crisis that is calling into question the stability of the Pakistani government.

According to unnamed US and Pakistani security officials cited by major wire services, the target of the attack was a "training center" run by a local Taliban commander, and the victims, whose bodies local villagers dug from the rubble, were "mostly militants."

At least 50 others were wounded in the attacks, which involved four or five missiles that struck a residential building. It was the second such missile attack in the Kurram tribal region in less than a month. An attack on February 16 killed 31 people.

The attacks are part of a major escalation of the US military intervention in both Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan as part of the Obama administration's emerging strategy for the region.

The administration is expected to formally unveil this strategy as early as next week. According to Pentagon and White House officials who spoke to the Associated Press, the plan will place particular emphasis on Pakistan, demanding that it take greater military action to suppress anti-US occupation forces in the tribal areas.

Even before the issuing of the report, Obama has ordered an additional 17,000 US troops into Afghanistan in response to a growing insurgency that has deprived the occupation forces and the US-backed regime of President Hamid Karzai of control over roughly three-quarters of the country. This is the first installment on an escalation that is expected to double the number of US troops in the country to 60,000.

The inevitable result of such a buildup of US military forces will be a dramatic increase in the deaths of Afghan civilians, which already rose 40 percent in 2008 over the previous year.

On Thursday, US Central Command chief Gen. David Petraeus and Richard Holbrooke, the US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, delivered a closed-door briefing to leading members of the US Senate in what was apparently part of the preparation for the public presentation of the new strategy for waging the war that was first launched by the administration of George W. Bush nearly seven and a half years

ago.

In an appearance on PBS Television's "Charlie Rose Show," Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that the strategy review would focus on "the safe haven in Pakistan, making sure that Afghanistan doesn't provide a capability in the long run or an environment in which Al Qaeda could return or the Taliban could return."

The Associated Press quoted an administration official as saying that "one thrust was that Pakistan needed to recognize that combating extremism was in its own interest as well as that of US and NATO fighting forces across Afghanistan."

A similar note was sounded by the top civilian leader of NATO Friday. Speaking in Warsaw, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer stressed the daunting challenge posed by the growing insurgency to the US-led NATO occupation forces. "We cannot make it all by ourselves," he said.

He insisted that Pakistan had to do more to suppress resistance in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the mountainous Pakistani-Afghan border.

"For that we need Pakistan because the same people who want to destabilize the FATA in Pakistan are the guys who are coming over the border and making life for Polish and Dutch and Canadian and Danes and Americans miserable in Afghanistan," he said.

Within Afghanistan itself, Obama and other administration officials have floated the idea that Washington will try to bribe sections of the insurgency into collaborating with the occupation along the lines of the strategy employed in Iraq to win over Sunni militia elements who were paid by the US military. US officials have spoken of opening up talks with elements of the Taliban.

Taliban representatives have responded that they have no interest in any talks until all foreign forces are withdrawn from Afghanistan.

The British daily *Telegraph*, citing US official sources, reported that the proposal for such talks is linked to plans to dramatically escalate military violence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The newspaper reported: "...officials consulted on the plans said the military conflict would be raised to new levels of intensity before talks could begin. 'There will be talks but the Taliban are going to experience a lot of pain first, on both sides of the border,' said one senior Western diplomat."

Both the Afghan and Pakistani governments have repeatedly complained that US air attacks and the civilian casualties they inflict in both countries have only served to increase support for the anti-occupation insurgencies while destabilizing the political situation in Pakistan. There are ample indications, however, that such protests from the Pakistani government are for public consumption, aimed at assuaging popular anger over the air strikes while the Pakistani state provides direct support for these attacks, including allowing the US to launch its drones from a base located inside Pakistan.

The latest missile attack is particularly provocative, given the escalating political crisis in Pakistan. Washington is signaling all sides that it will act with impunity in carrying out military actions on Pakistani soil while demanding that domestic political conflicts be subordinated to the US "war on terror."

US officials have intervened aggressively in a bid to force an end to the showdown between President Asif Ali Zardari of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and his political rival Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML).

Obama's special envoy Holbrooke, the US Ambassador in Islamabad Anne Patterson and British Foreign Secretary David Milliband held conference calls and meetings with Zardari and Sharif demanding a speedy resolution of the power struggle between the two bourgeois parties for fear that its continuation could lead to the government's collapse.

According to the Pakistani daily *Dawn*: "Representatives of the US and the UK governments told President Zardari that political instability in Pakistan weakens their efforts on the war on terror and thus political unrest should be overcome, otherwise it will help militants to reorganise and emerge with more force to meet their agenda. The US and the UK leaders were of the view that political mayhem in Pakistan is creating a vacuum in the country leaving the militants unchecked."

In particular, Washington and London are anxious to reach some kind of power-sharing settlement between the two parties before the scheduled March 16 arrival in Islamabad of a "Long March" organized by Pakistani lawyers and supported by the PML. It is feared that the march, called to demand the reinstatement of judges who were removed from the bench under a 2007 emergency rule decreed by former military strongman Gen. Pervez Musharraf, could produce violent confrontations.

Already, security forces have arrested at least 1,000 lawyers and politicians, while many demonstrators have been beaten. Late Thursday, security forces blockaded the main highway out of Karachi—a principal supply route for US occupation forces in Afghanistan—in an attempt to prevent protesters from leaving the city for Islamabad.

In another repressive act, the Dubai-based Pakistani news television channel Geo News was forced off the air after cable operators were threatened by the government and told to halt their broadcasts of the channel, according to Pakistani press reports.

One year after Zardari came into office it is becoming increasingly evident that he is employing much the same methods as his predecessor, the military ruler Musharraf. As Pakistan's *News International* commented in its lead editorial Thursday: "Even in Pakistan's troubled history of democratic governments, it is rare to find the kind of open fascism we are seeing today." Zardari, it continued, had abandoned the "pretense of democratic practice" and reacted like "many bloodthirsty dictators."

Ultimately, the adoption of such methods is a function not merely of the political squabble between the PPP and the PML, but of the political, economic and social agenda of Pakistan's capitalist state, which is deeply unpopular with the broad masses of workers, peasants and the poor.

In an ominous development, the Indian-based news service IANS reported that the chief of the Pakistani army, Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, delivered Zardari an "internationally backed" 24-hour deadline to bring an end to the political crisis.

The deadline was "backed by Washington, London and the army establishment," according to the Pakistani Internet news site "A Pakistan News." The site went on to say that Zardari will "be asked to go" by the army and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani "if he does not accept a new deal hatched by them in consultation with foreign powers."

In his interview with PBS, US Admiral Mullen said the Pentagon was closely following the political confrontation in Pakistan and cited concerns that it could "possibly generate a crisis, which may cause actions to be taken on the part of the military."

Mullen praised his Pakistani counterpart, Gen. Kayani, declaring him "committed to a civilian government" and insisting that "the last thing in the world he wants to do... is take over as President Musharraf did." The admiral added, "He wants to do the right thing for Pakistan. But he is in a very tough spot."

The implications are clear. Washington is prepared to back the imposition of another military dictatorship in Pakistan should it conclude that the present civilian government is proving an unacceptable impediment to its escalating military intervention in the region.



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