

US drone strike kills 80 Pakistanis

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On Tuesday, an unmanned US Predator drone fired missiles into a funeral procession in the Pakistani region of South Waziristan, killing as many as 80 people and maiming dozens more. It was the deadliest US attack within Pakistan to date.

The mourners had gathered for the funeral of seven victims of another US drone attack that had taken place earlier the same day. US media accounts described the target as a “Taliban training center in South Waziristan.” According to local sources, those killed and wounded in the attack were mostly civilians. The US has stepped up its drone attacks on South Waziristan in preparation for a major ground offensive by the Pakistani military. Pakistani fighter jets have also been bombing the region.

Last Sunday, US drones fired missiles at a home in the South Waziristan district of Makeen, killing at least five. On Thursday, June 18, a US drone bombed a house close to the capital of South Waziristan, Wana, killing one. When villagers ran to rescue those they feared trapped in the rubble, the unmanned plane fired its missiles again, killing 12 more. Tuesday’s attack on the funeral procession in the village of Najmaral, also in the Makeen district, appears to have been aimed at Pakistani militant leader Baitulla Mehsud. Mehsud was not at the funeral, which was held for a tribal leader and six others killed in that morning’s attack. The increasing carnage inflicted on the Pakistanis is the direct result of the escalation of military violence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan ordered by President Obama. The new administration has already sent an additional 12,000 US soldiers as part of a “surge” that will bring the US troop presence in Afghanistan by the end of the year to 60,000.

At the same time, the Obama administration is extending the war into Pakistan, both through an increase in US missile attacks on an ever-widening swath of the country and through the exertion of pressure on the Pakistani regime of President Asif Ali Zardari to intensify the Pakistani military’s violence in the regions bordering Afghanistan.

This policy has already produced a sharp rise in civilian casualties in both countries. In Pakistan, millions have been displaced in areas such as the Swat Valley as a result of the Pakistani military offensive.

In line with its escalation, the Obama administration this month sacked the US military commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, replacing him with General Stanley McChrystal, a Special Forces commander who has directed military assassination squads.

That the increase in drone attacks is part of a deliberate policy of targeting civilians in regions controlled by insurgent forces opposed both to the US and the Pakistani government is underscored by this week’s visit by Obama’s national security advisor, General James Jones, to Islamabad. According to the White House, the purpose of Jones’s visit is to personally oversee “the implementation of our new, comprehensive strategy.”

The US drone attack on the funeral procession exposes the hypocrisy of Obama’s professed outrage over the Iranian government’s repression of students and others protesting the June 12 elections. In just one day of drone attacks in neighboring Pakistan, the US killed more than twice as many civilians as have been reportedly killed in the course of the protests in Iran.

Local residents who survived Tuesday’s attack said the drone fired three missiles into the crowd of mourners. “After the prayers ended, people were asking each other to leave the area as drones were hovering,”

Mohammad Saeed Khan, 35, told Agence France-Presse from a hospital in North Waziristan. Khan lost his leg in the US attack.

He added, “First, two drones fired two missiles. It created havoc. There was smoke and dust everywhere. Injured people were crying and asking for help... They fired the third missile after a minute, and I fell on the ground.”

Another local resident explained to *Free Speech Radio News*, “Many people were present at the funeral of a commander who was killed in a US attack. In the morning we heard a huge sound. Everyone understood it was a US drone, as people here are used to hearing the huge sounds of US drone attacks.”

He continued, “Most of the local people want to leave this area, but they cannot leave due to their poverty. I believe many innocent civilians are among the dead. It is our culture and religious teaching that most people attend funeral prayers, so it means that not all killed would be militants.”

Villagers were unable to provide help to those injured for hours, as US drones continued to hover overhead, according to Pakistani media. The US has carried out 43 drone attacks in Pakistan since January, 2008. About half of these have taken place under the Obama administration, leading to a death toll of well over 700.

The US does not officially comment on or claim responsibility for the drone attacks, and Pakistan officially condemns them as a violation of its sovereignty. The remote-controlled drone attacks in Pakistan are run by the Central Intelligence Agency. The attack on the funeral in South Waziristan comes less than one week after the new US commander for the “Af-Pak” theater, General McChrystal, announced a change in the rules of engagement in Afghanistan supposedly aimed at limiting the number of civilian casualties resulting from air strikes.

The sharp increase in drone attacks in Pakistan exposes the official professions of concern for civilian casualties as mere lies. A recent United Nations study reveals that civilian casualties in Afghanistan increased by 40 percent in 2008, and since Obama took office, the use of air power has increased in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Just days before Tuesday’s drone attacks, the Pentagon released the results of its investigation into the May 4 massacre of civilians in a US air attack on the village of Granai in Afghanistan’s western province of Farah. The Pentagon, which originally denied that any civilians died, grudgingly acknowledged the death of 26. The death toll was far higher. The Afghan government says 140 civilians were killed, among them 93 children.



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