

The assassination of Baitullah Mehsud

James Cogan
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The American political establishment and media, along with Washington's client government in Islamabad, are reveling in the reports that missiles launched from an unmanned US Predator drone on Wednesday killed 39-year-old Pakistani tribal leader Baitullah Mehsud at his father-in-law's residence in the agency of South Waziristan.

The descriptions of the Predator attack make clear that the Obama administration ordered an act of mass murder. It was carried out in the dead of night and with utter indifference to how many people were killed.

According to sources from the Pakistani Express News channel, a missile fired into the housing compound at 1 a.m. massacred seven of the family's bodyguards and 26 others, including the Taliban leader's young wife. Other accounts refer to dead and wounded children. Mehsud himself was reportedly killed when a second missile was fired into the car he was using in an attempt to escape.

The gloating in Washington and Islamabad has been somewhat restrained because officials have not been able to definitively confirm that Mehsud is dead. The area of South Waziristan in which the attack took place is entirely under the control of the ethnic Pashtun Mehsud tribal confederation.

Under Baitullah's leadership, the Mehsuds and other Pashtun tribes have defeated the Pakistani government's attempts since 2004 to strip them of the political autonomy they have enjoyed in the country's border region with Afghanistan since the days of the British Raj.

Mehsud's murder is being justified by the White House and the Pakistani government on the grounds that he was a "terrorist" and an "Al Qaeda ally." The subservient media has repeated such claims uncritically. In reality, "terrorist" has become an all-purpose catchword applied to all those who oppose US military occupation and neo-colonial domination of their country.

Baitullah Mehsud was not a member of Al Qaeda, nor did he have any involvement in terrorist attacks on the United States or other Western countries. He was not directly involved in attacks across the border on US and

NATO forces in Afghanistan.

His crime is that he supported Afghan insurgents using the Pakistani tribal agencies as safe havens for their guerilla war against the US occupation of their country and opposed the US-backed regime in Islamabad. The Pakistani Pashtun tribes have adhered to the same policy they followed during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, providing assistance to fighters waging what they view as a legitimate war by the Afghan people for liberation from foreign domination.

Before 2007, Baitullah Mehsud was barely known outside South Waziristan. He emerged as a leader among the Mehsud tribe only after a US air strike in 2004 killed Nek Mohammad, the tribal head who had led the resistance to the initial offensive of Pakistani government troops into Waziristan. Mehsud commanded the fighters who repulsed several subsequent assaults that were ordered by the Islamabad government under pressure from Washington—and in violation of truces that had been signed with the Pashtun tribes.

In late 2007, Mehsud was named the overall leader of Tehrik-e-Taliban, a new organisation formed to unify tribal and Islamist resistance to the actions of the Pakistani government and assist the Afghan Taliban's struggle against the US-NATO occupation.

To justify operations against the Pakistani Taliban, the regime of General Musharraf accused Mehsud of directing the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto in December 2007. Mehsud categorically denied any involvement in Bhutto's killing. Over the following years, however, he did claim responsibility for a series of suicide bombings against military targets in various parts of Pakistan, on the grounds they were retaliation for US and Pakistani government air strikes in the tribal agencies.

The decision in Washington to target Baitullah Mehsud is the direct outcome of the Obama administration's re-focus on Afghanistan and its escalation of the conflict into the so-called "AfPak War" on both sides of the border. The Bush administration did not target Mehsud or South Waziristan for attack by drone-launched missiles because

Mehsud's forces were not involved in fighting in Afghanistan.

The Obama administration agreed to target Mehsud—intervening militarily into the internal political situation of Pakistan—as a quid pro quo for Pakistani President Zardari's tacit support for US drone attacks inside Pakistan and Islamabad's agreement to launch military offensives against insurgents in the Swat Valley and other areas near the Afghan border.

In March, a price tag of \$5 million was placed on the tribal leader's head. Predator drone operations were stepped up in Waziristan and other tribal areas. According to the *Dawn* newspaper, whereas 34 were attacks were carried out in 2008, Obama has already ordered 28 this year, of which 19 were attempts to kill Mehsud or his chief lieutenants. Hundreds of civilians have been killed in the process.

Mehsud's assassination is emblematic of the criminal, reckless and incendiary character of Obama's war in Central Asia.

The Bush administration's original justification for the invasion of Afghanistan—to kill or capture Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders who ordered the September 11 attacks—has been dropped. The attempts to portray the war as an effort to bring “democracy” to Afghanistan have also fallen by the wayside, under conditions in which up to half the country is in rebellion against the occupation and does not accept the legitimacy of the US puppet regime headed by President Hamid Karzai.

The war stands exposed as a bloody neo-colonial enterprise aimed at ensuring US imperialism and its NATO allies' strategic dominance over the oil-rich Central Asian republics and curbing the influence of other regional powers such as China, Russia, India and Iran.

The resistance in Afghanistan and Pakistan is being answered by Obama with more troops, death squads and collective punishment against the civilian population. The result thus far has been the growth of the insurgency. This year, 251 US and NATO troops have been killed, compared with 294 in all 2008. In the first week of August, at least 19 have lost their lives.

What began nearly eight years ago with the overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan is now plunging nuclear-armed Pakistan toward full-scale civil war. The military operations and indiscriminate US killings in the tribal agencies have fuelled mass anger toward the government.

After years of violence, large sections of the ethnic

Pashtun population view themselves as at war with Islamabad. Immediately following the killing of Mehsud, the Pakistani military and police threw up checkpoints and roadblocks throughout the capital and other cities. Widespread retaliatory attacks for Mehsud's death are considered inevitable.

The majority of the population in every country that has troops deployed in Afghanistan does not support the war, including the United States. In contempt for the views of the public, Obama and his international allies are escalating the occupation to dangerous new dimensions. They are being aided by the erstwhile liberals and middle-class pacifists, who have abandoned their opposition to war with the coming to power of Obama.

The completely illegal targeted assassination of Mehsud can only further inflame both the internal situation in Pakistan and conflicts throughout Central Asia and beyond. US imperialist policy is exacerbating tensions with China and Russia, and further destabilising relations between the traditional foes Pakistan and India—both of which possess nuclear weapons. Ultimately, the logic of US militarism leads to a global conflagration.

The working class in the US and internationally, organised on a socialist perspective, is the only social force that can put an end to militarism and imperialist war. The very foundations of the capitalist profit system must be overturned in order to eliminate the root cause of crimes such as the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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