

Death squads, disappearances and torture in Pakistan

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As the Obama administration prepares a major escalation of the so-called AfPak war, reports from Pakistan's Swat Valley, near Afghanistan's eastern border, provide a gruesome indication of the kind of war that the Pentagon and its local allies are waging.

While touted by Obama and his supporters as the “good war,” there is mounting evidence that the Pentagon and the CIA are engaged in a war against the population of the region involving death squads, disappearances and torture.

The Pakistani army sent 20,000 troops into Swat, part of the country's North West Frontier Province (NWFP), last April to wage war against ethnic Pashtun Islamist movements (routinely described as the Pakistani Taliban) that have supported fellow Pashtuns across the border who are resisting the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

This offensive, which was carried out on the direct and highly public insistence of US envoy Richard Holbrooke and senior American military officers during repeated trips to Islamabad, unleashed a humanitarian catastrophe. In what amounted to a massive exercise in collective punishment, many civilians were killed or wounded and some 2.5 million people were driven from their homes.

Now, the Pakistani military continues to occupy the area, carrying out a reign of terror in which individuals identified as opponents of the government and the US occupation across the border are being picked up and tortured to death.

According to a report published September 15 in the *New York Times*, with the military occupation of the Swat Valley “a new campaign of fear has taken hold, with scores, perhaps hundreds, of bodies dumped on the streets in what human rights advocates and local residents say is the work of the military.”

While the Pakistani military has denied responsibility for this wave of killings—blaming them on civilians seeking revenge against the Islamists—the *Times* quotes local residents, politicians and human rights workers as blaming the army. They point, the article states, to “the scale of the retaliation, the similarities in the way that many of the victims have been tortured and the systematic nature of the deaths and disappearances in areas that the military firmly controls.”

In addition to bearing marks of brutal torture, many of the bodies are discovered with their hands tied behind their backs and with a bullet in the back of the neck. In some cases corpses have been beheaded.

On September 1, the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* quoted government officials as saying that 251 bodies had been found dumped along the roadside in the Swat Valley since July. On August 27, the newspaper reported that 51 bodies had been found in the area in the space of just 24 hours.

Dawn has also reported the discovery of a number of mass graves containing victims of the military and referred to local residents who had “witnessed the crude and inhuman lumping together of the living and the dead.”

The *Times* cites the case of Akhtar Ali, 28, arrested by the military at his electrical repair shop on September 1. While military officials repeatedly told his family that he would be released, four days later his corpse was dumped on their doorstep, bearing cigarette burns and with nails hammered into his flesh. “There was no place on his body not tortured,” his family said in a petition seeking justice.

American officials have praised the Pakistani military for its campaign in the Swat Valley, with US Ambassador Anne Patterson visiting Mingora, Swat's

largest town, last week to congratulate the army.

Now US officials are pressing the Pakistani government to replicate this bloody campaign in South Waziristan. A similar offensive is already underway in the Khyber Agency, site of the Khyber Pass, a key route for supplies to the US occupation force in Afghanistan. UN officials report that 100,000 people have been displaced by the attack.

Washington stands behind the atrocities being carried out against the Pakistani people. It is funding the Pakistani military operations, with some \$2.5 billion in overt military aid this fiscal year. Meanwhile, CIA drone attacks continue, having claimed nearly 600 Pakistani victims over the past year, the majority of them civilians.

There is every reason to suspect that the wave of disappearances, torture and death squad assassinations in Pakistan is also “made in the USA.”

Before becoming the US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal headed the military’s Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), the secret special operations unit that investigative journalist Seymour Hersh described as an “executive assassination wing.”

US special forces “trainers” are operating on Pakistani soil, instructing Pakistani forces in the kind of tactics favored by JSOC—tactics that yield the bound and battered bodies dumped in the streets of Swat.

These tactics fit a long pattern of US counterinsurgency warfare, from Operation Phoenix in Vietnam to the US-backed death squads that terrorized the population of El Salvador in the 1980s.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen warned again Tuesday in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the military will almost certainly seek an increase in troop levels over the 70,000 American soldiers and Marines that are to be deployed in Afghanistan by the end of this year.

Citing diplomatic sources, *Dawn* reported that Gen. McChrystal is calling for a shift in the war’s focus to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area.

Having lost control of most of Afghanistan after nearly eight years of US occupation, the Pentagon is preparing to launch a new wave of bloodletting and terror against the population on both sides of the border in the hope of breaking popular resistance.

The administration of Barack Obama, elected on a

wave of antiwar sentiment, is already implicated in war crimes that rival those carried out by his predecessor. Support for the war within the US has declined to levels approaching those reached over Iraq, with the latest CNN poll showing 58 percent of Americans opposing the US occupation of Afghanistan and only 39 percent supporting it.

Driven by the interests of the US ruling elite, the escalation of this dirty war, together with the escalating assault on jobs and living standards at home, is creating the conditions for the emergence of a mass political movement of working people against the Obama administration and the profit system which is the driving force of imperialist war.

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