

UN agency bombed in Pakistan

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A Pakistani Taliban militant carried out a suicide bombing against the UN World Food Program (WFP) headquarters in Islamabad on Monday, killing five UN workers. A spokesman for the Taliban leadership, Azam Tariq, claimed responsibility, declaring in a statement that “the UN and other foreign aid groups are not working in the interests of Muslims”.

The UN staff union has condemned the United Nations for failing to provide adequate security for its employees. The Pakistani government had warned the UN for the past two years that the WFP offices were located in an area that was “not secure” and advised that they be moved. The suicide bomber, dressed as a member of the paramilitary Frontier Corp, was able to enter the building unchallenged by simply saying he needed to use the bathroom.

The bombing was the first attack on a UN agency inside Pakistan, but intelligence agencies have repeatedly warned that the Taliban would target UN facilities. The hostility towards the UN and its agencies is not surprising. The US-led occupation of Afghanistan is being conducted and legitimised under UN resolutions. The UN and its various organisations collaborate closely with the efforts of the US and NATO to consolidate their grip over the country.

Within Pakistan, the UN plays a similar role. After the military carries out the offensives demanded by Washington against insurgents in the border areas with Afghanistan, the UN assists the government in helping to stabilise the resulting chaotic situation.

In its operations in Bajaur and Mohmand tribal agencies and the Swat Valley district of North West Frontier Province (NWFP), the Pakistani army deliberately set out to separate the militants from the

local population by creating fear and panic. Over the past 16 months, as many as three million people have been forced from their homes. The World Food Program stepped in to help by providing food for the huge refugee camps.

The same tactics are being used ahead of a planned military offensive into the Taliban strongholds of South and North Waziristan. Aerial bombardments have already forced 128,000 civilians to flee the agencies. Many are now living in UN-run camps, under the scrutiny of the repressive Pakistani military and police apparatus.

A report by a UN investigation team following the bombing of its headquarters in Algiers on December 11, 2007 noted that the UN was viewed as “an instrument of powerful member states to advance agendas that serve their own interests rather than those of global community of nations”. While the report did not state it openly, the UN endorsement of and assistance to the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have stripped it of any ability to posture as a neutral body.

The bombing in Islamabad took place 24 hours after the new leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Hakimullah Mehsud, gave his first interview in South Waziristan to a group of journalists. He threatened to exact revenge for the killing of hundreds of Taliban in attacks by US Predator aircraft and the Pakistani military. The previous Taliban leader, Baitullah Mehsud, was assassinated by American missiles on August 5. Hakimullah’s brother was killed in a firefight with government troops last week.

Hakimullah also declared the Taliban was ready for any offensive into South Waziristan by the Pakistani

military. Two army divisions with some 28,000 troops, along with thousands of Frontier Corp paramilitary personnel, have been laying siege to the area for the past four months. Transport of food and other essentials has been cut off. Villages and towns have been bombed from both the air and ground. The various Islamist militia in the areas are estimated to have between 10,000 and 20,000 fighters. Pakistani military commanders have predicted that their troops will take heavy casualties

The Obama administration is believed to be pressing the Pakistani government to begin the offensive as soon as possible, before the onset of winter makes an operation impossible until next year. Since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, South and North Waziristan have been one of the main safe havens for Afghan insurgents fighting the occupation. Fighters needing rest, supplies and training move with virtual impunity over the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Afghan insurgent movement led by Jalaluddin Haqqani—one of the main commanders of the anti-Soviet mujahaddin resistance in the 1980s—is believed to have its bases in North Waziristan.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari's apparent willingness to bow to US pressure, however, is fuelling hostility to his government. Recent opinion polls showed that 80 percent of the population now opposes providing any support for the so-called "war on terror", which includes planning for an assault on the tribal agencies.

The Kerry-Lugar Act now before the US Senate—which sets terms on the provision of \$7.5 billion in non-military US aid to Pakistan over the next five years, along with an unspecified amount of military aid—has only inflamed recriminations against both Washington and Zardari.

The Pakistani military has publicly denounced as a challenge to "national security" a stipulation in the Act that would require the US Secretary of State to provide the Senate with a report every six months assessing the extent of Pakistani government control over the armed forces, including in regard to promotions.

Another element of the legislation is that Pakistan carry out offensives against militants not only in the tribal agencies, but in the provinces of Balochistan and Punjab as well. The Kerry-Lugar Act specifically demands operations in Quetta, Balochistan, and Muridke, a city near the Punjabi capital Lahore. It also requires US access to Pakistani nationals who have been involved in the country's nuclear program.

The parliamentary opposition in Pakistan is calling for the entire aid package to be rejected as a violation of national sovereignty. Opposition leader Nisar Ali Khan, of the Pakistan Muslim League led by Nawaz Sharif, declared that "each and every page of the bill is reflective of the insulting attitude towards Pakistan", and denounced it as seeking "to safeguard the interests of the United States". If Zardari does not accept the terms of Kerry-Lugar Act, it could lead to an open rift between the US and Pakistan, particularly if Islamabad looks for aid from elsewhere.

The net effect of Obama's attempt to expand the occupation of Afghanistan into an "AfPak War" on both sides of the border has proven to be heightened anti-Western sentiment in Pakistan and a steady spiral into greater violence and instability.



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