

# US ground attacks reported in Pakistan

Bill Van Auken  
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Amid a deepening political crisis in Pakistan and growing popular unrest over US missile strikes and mercenaries, it has been revealed that over the past five years US special operations troops have conducted a number of clandestine cross-border raids into the country's tribal areas.

These raids involved "helicopter-borne elite soldiers stealing across the border at night, and were never declared to the Pakistani government," according to a "former NATO officer" cited in an article published Monday by the British daily *Guardian*.

The only publicly acknowledged incursion by US forces took place on September 3, 2008, when US Navy Seals were flown by helicopter into a village in South Waziristan, where they raided three compounds and slaughtered some 20 people. While Washington claimed those killed were Al Qaeda fighters, the Pakistani government said that the victims were all villagers and included six women and two children.

The incident provoked widespread outrage in Pakistan, with the government denouncing the attack as a "grave provocation" and the country's parliament demanding that the military use force to repel any further violations of the country's sovereignty. Unnamed US officials told the media that the Pakistani regime had acquiesced to the raid, something Islamabad vehemently denied.

According to the *Guardian* account, however, the raid was the fourth such incursion to take place between 2003 and 2008. Two of the previous assaults had been similar assassination or "snatch and grab" missions against alleged Al Qaeda members, while a third was launched to recover a downed Predator drone, which the US military feared would fall into the hands of the Afghan resistance.

It was reported following the 2008 raid that President George W. Bush had issued a secret order allowing the US military to carry out cross-border attacks into Pakistan on the theory that the country, together with Afghanistan, were all part of the same theater in the "global war on terrorism."

This policy has apparently been continued by President Barack Obama and is about to be intensified as part of the administration's military escalation, which is sending at least 30,000 more troops into Afghanistan.

Since Obama took office, the CIA and US military have doubled the number of missile attacks from pilotless Predator drones, killing hundreds of Pakistani civilians. Now the US administration is demanding that the Pakistani government acquiesce in a further expansion of the drone campaign and that it undertake its own military offensive against Afghan resistance forces operating out of northwest Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, near the Afghanistan border.

A steady stream of top US officials, including CIA Director Leon Panetta and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen, have flown to Islamabad to pressure the government of President Asif Ali Zardari and the Pakistani military to fall into line with the Obama

administration's military escalation.

US officials have demanded that the Pakistani military launch an attack against alleged sanctuaries of the so-called Haqqani network in North Waziristan. The group is led by Sirajuddin Haqqani and his father Jalaluddin. In the 1980s, the latter was one of the principal recipients of US arms and money during the CIA-backed war against the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul.

Washington is also pressing the Pakistani government to give it a green light for expanding the drone missile strikes from the tribal areas to Baluchistan, Pakistan's largest province. Baluchistan borders Helmand province in Afghanistan, where much of the US and British counterinsurgency operation has been concentrated.

Press reports in both the US and Pakistan indicate that US officials have gone so far as to propose drone attacks on Quetta, a crowded city of nearly 600,000. The Pentagon and US intelligence agencies claim that Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar, the founder of the movement, plan and direct military operations in Afghanistan from a safe haven in the city.

The Pakistani daily *Dawn* reported Wednesday that "Diplomatic sources say Pakistani leadership had been unequivocally cautioned by various official visitors from the US that if Pakistan failed to act, the Americans could take direct action, including expansion of drone strikes in Baluchistan."

Tensions have mounted between Islamabad and Washington. While the Pakistani government and military have long done US imperialism's bidding in the region, the war in neighboring Afghanistan and the US incursions into Pakistan are threatening to destabilize the entire country. Out of self-preservation, the Pakistani ruling elite appears to be balking at the latest US demands.

This was reflected in an appearance Tuesday by Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi before the foreign affairs committee of Pakistan's National Assembly, where he criticized the Obama administration's escalation strategy.

According to a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry, he told legislators that the Zardari government would not allow either the entry of US and NATO troops into Pakistan in so-called "hot pursuit" or the expansion of the drone missile campaign.

"There are serious implications of the new US Afghanistan strategy for Pakistan," Qureshi was quoted as saying in the ministry statement. "As a result of the military surge, there could be more violence in Afghanistan which could, in turn, result in further influx of militants and refugees from Afghanistan into Pakistan."

The minister described the drone attacks as "counter-productive and unhelpful." This formal position of the Pakistani government is belied by the fact that the CIA is launching these strikes from an airfield in Baluchistan, with the evident knowledge and consent of Islamabad.

The Associated Press, meanwhile, cited an unnamed "senior US diplomat" as stating that "more US action is expected against the

Haqqani network,” and that it “would come with Pakistani support.”

Thus far, the Pakistani military has rejected US demands that it launch a new offensive in North Waziristan to go after Haqqani’s forces. It has maintained that its troops are already committed to an offensive in South Waziristan and that it cannot carry out the two campaigns simultaneously.

“We cannot fight on so many fronts,” a Pakistani security official told the *Times* of London.

This approach has angered Washington, which maintains that the Pakistani government is willing to use force against Pakistani Taliban militants carrying out attacks within its borders, but not against elements using Pakistan to launch attacks on US occupation forces in neighboring Afghanistan.

Underlying the Pakistani position, according to many analysts, are the longstanding ties between the Haqqanis and the Pakistan military intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI.

Pakistan’s influence over the Taliban and resistance elements allied with it is seen as a means of securing Pakistani interests in Afghanistan once the US is forced to withdraw from the country. Islamabad is particularly fearful of a growing Indian presence in Afghanistan.

“If America walks away, Pakistan is very worried that it will have India on its eastern border and India on its western border in Afghanistan,” Tariq Fatemi, a former Pakistani ambassador to the US, told the *New York Times*.

Contributing to the growing US-Pakistani tensions is the political crisis of the Pakistani regime, which has been shaken by a high court ruling striking down an amnesty brokered by the Bush administration with the country’s former military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf. The deal protected politicians of Zardari’s Pakistani People’s Party (PPP) from corruption charges.

Now, Defense Minister Ahmed Muktar and Interior Minister Rehman Malik, two of the key figures in coordinating military policy with Washington, are facing criminal indictments and have been barred from leaving the country. The opposition parties have demanded that the government resign.

The Obama administration’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, commented on what he called “the major political drama unfolding in Islamabad” in an appearance on the US Public Broadcasting System interview program hosted by Charlie Rose.

“How it’s going to come out remains to be seen,” said Holbrooke, adding, “It’s something that we are watching very carefully.”

In the same interview, Holbrooke described as a “dilemma” that “the leadership of both Al Qaeda and Taliban are in a neighboring country where our troops cannot fight.” He said that the US would “have to find other means” to deal with the issue. He defended the US drone missile attacks, described by human rights agencies as extrajudicial executions. “Some of the most dangerous people in the world...are not alive today,” because of the strikes, he said.

But the missile strikes, combined with the growing US presence in Pakistan, are provoking mounting popular opposition.

This has taken the form in recent weeks of demonstrations in several Pakistani cities against the reported presence in the country of US mercenaries from the infamous military contracting firm, Blackwater-Xe.

Thousands of people attended an anti-Blackwater rally Sunday in Rawalpindi, Pakistan’s fourth-largest city and the headquarters of its military. Called by Jamaat-e-Islami, Pakistan’s largest Islamist party,

under the slogan “Go America, Go,” the rally’s speakers denounced Blackwater as “US terrorists” and charged that Washington was undermining Pakistan’s sovereignty and deliberately seeking to destabilize the country in order to seize control of its nuclear weapons.

Last weekend, hundreds of lawyers from the Islamabad Bar Association staged another anti-Blackwater rally outside the Police Training College in Sihala, demanding that the government expel foreign instructors, who, the demonstrators charged, were Blackwater operatives. The lawyers and others have also charged that the training operation is being used as a cover for US spying on Pakistan’s nearby Kahuta nuclear facility. Following the protest, the Pakistani government announced that it was moving the training college to a police headquarters in Islamabad.

Blackwater changed its name to Xe Services because of the company’s gruesome reputation following a 2007 massacre of 17 Iraqi civilians by its gunmen.

Both Washington and Blackwater executives deny that any of its personnel are deployed in Pakistan. Multiple press reports in both the US and Britain, however, have cited current and former US officials as saying that the mercenary outfit is indeed active in Pakistan.

Jeremy Scahill, author of the book *Blackwater: the Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army*, reported in the *Nation* magazine last month that Blackwater is playing a leading role in gathering intelligence for and executing the drone attacks, and that it is “at the center of a secret program in which they plan targeted assassinations of suspected Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives.”

The drone attacks, the cross-border raids by Special Operations troops and the use of American mercenaries, combined with the escalating pressure from Washington for an expansion of Pakistani military offensives in the Afghanistan border region, are all contributing to the political destabilization of this nuclear-armed country of 180 million people.

Carried out in secret and behind the backs of the American people, this crucial element of the Obama administration’s military escalation threatens to unleash a far wider war.



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