

US drone missiles slaughtered 700 Pakistani civilians in 2009

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US drone missile attacks have claimed the lives of over 700 Pakistani civilians since Barack Obama took office a year ago, according to figures released this week by officials in Islamabad. The escalation of Washington's AfPak war, now in full swing, will mean the slaughter of thousands more men, women and children in 2010.

The grim death toll was announced in the Pakistani English-language daily *Dawn* Monday, just as news of the latest strike by a Hellfire missile made its way from an impoverished village near the Afghanistan border.

The missile strike left dead and buried in the rubble of their home a Pakistani teacher and his nine-year-old son. According to media accounts citing unnamed US intelligence officials, the teacher's home had been targeted for a Predator drone attack because of reports that militants had frequented the house.

Who provided these reports? How were they verified? Was there any evidence that the teacher—not to mention his child—were in any way implicated in the activities of the alleged “militants?”

No answers are forthcoming from the US government or the CIA, which conducts the majority of these attacks, reaffirming the intelligence agency's reputation as Murder, Inc.

Washington, the CIA and the Pentagon have arrogated to themselves the unlimited right to carry out extra-judicial executions wherever they please, with no need for explanation, much less probative evidence. Initiated under the Bush administration in the name of a global war on terror, this criminal practice has been only intensified under Obama.

Over the course of the past year, US drones have fired missiles into the tribal areas of western Pakistan 44 times—more than twice the number of strikes carried out during the last year of the Bush administration. Citing

statistics compiled by Pakistani government officials, *Dawn* reports that these missile strikes succeeded in killing only “five key Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders,” while their so-called collateral damage included the lives of 708 innocent civilians.

“For each Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorist killed by US drones, 140 innocent Pakistanis also had to die,” the newspaper reports. “Over 90 per cent of those killed in the deadly missile strikes were civilians, claim authorities.”

The newspaper listed as one of the drone campaign's few successes the missile strike that killed the leader of the Pakistan Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, and his wife on August 5 of last year. As investigative reporter Jane Mayer pointed out in the *New Yorker* last October, however, it took “sixteen missile strikes, and fourteen months, before the CIA succeeded in killing him.” The earlier, failed attacks are believed to have killed as many as 321 innocent civilians, while terrorizing an entire region.

There is no information from the US government to contradict *Dawn's* story. The CIA classifies its drone program as “covert” and provides no information as to the number or identity of the people it kills. Citing unnamed intelligence sources (as well as military spokesmen in Afghanistan), the media routinely report that all those killed in drone attacks are “militants.” Only when eyewitness accounts of the torn bodies of women and children make it out of the remote tribal areas is there any suggestion that the truth might be otherwise.

“Most of the attacks were carried out on the basis of human intelligence, reportedly provided by the Pakistani and Afghan tribesmen who are spying for the US-led allied forces in Afghanistan,” the *Dawn* article added.

Last week's suicide bombing that killed seven CIA agents and a top Jordanian intelligence agent at Forward Operating Base Chapman in eastern Afghanistan provided one indication of the reliability of such intelligence. The operatives at FOB Chapman were directly involved in choosing targets for the Predator drones. The bomber, considered one of their key "assets," fed them false information for over a year before calling the operatives—including the CIA chief of the operation—to a meeting in order to kill them.

The drone campaign in Pakistan is a protracted exercise in "targeted assassinations" and mass murder carried out against the people of a country with which the US is supposedly not even at war. It exemplifies everything that is criminal and reactionary in US imperialism's campaign of military aggression in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.

CIA functionaries and military contractors (i.e., well-paid mercenaries) sit in front of video screens in Langley, Virginia, using joy sticks to send missiles crashing into the homes of Pakistani villagers. After a day spent murdering men, women and children 7,000 miles away, they get in their cars and drive home to their families and dinner.

Between the CIA's secrecy and the Pakistani regime's barring of media from the targeted tribal areas, the carnage from these attacks is largely hidden from the American people. To the extent that it is justified to the public, it is in the name of combating terrorism.

Considering the grim equation provided by the report in *Dawn*—140 dead civilians for every supposed "terrorist" killed by a Predator missile—this is clearly a pretext. The 44 strikes of the last year have done nothing to suppress terrorism. Rather, they have created thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people with a reason to strike back at the United States for the deaths of their families, friends and neighbors.

The drone strikes are part of an explosion of American militarism that has very different aims than combating terrorism or assuring the security of the US population. It is driven by the crisis of US capitalism and the attempt by the American ruling elite to overcome it by military means—first and foremost by imposing US hegemony over the energy-rich and strategically vital regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

The more than 700 killed on Obama's orders in the drone attacks over the last year is only the beginning. As part of his administration's military "surge," US officials have demanded that the Pakistani government launch an offensive to crush support for Afghans fighting against the US-led occupation. Washington has threatened that unless Islamabad takes decisive action, the US will act unilaterally, including with possible missile strikes against Quetta, a city of more than one million, where Taliban leaders have allegedly taken refuge.

Every escalation of US operations in Pakistan is further undermining the government, which is complicit in Washington's crimes, threatening to unleash a civil war in a nuclear-armed country and to destabilize the entire region.

The military-intelligence apparatus has embraced the drone missile attacks as a technological answer to the problem of waging a war that is opposed by the majority of the American people. They do not involve immediate US casualties, and the human toll they inflict remains largely concealed.

Nonetheless, they are sowing the seeds of a far wider military conflagration, which, if it is not stopped, will exact a terrible price on working people in the US and around the world.



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