

US charges Pakistani Taliban leader with murder of CIA agents

Tom Peters
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The US Justice Department filed criminal charges against Hakimullah Mehsud last Wednesday for allegedly organising the suicide attack in December on Forward Operating Base Chapman in Afghanistan near the border with Pakistan that killed seven CIA agents and wounded six more. The State Department also confirmed that it had added Mehsud's Tehrik-e-Taliban to its list of "foreign terrorist organisations", and is offering rewards of up to \$5 million for information about the location of Mehsud and his second-in-command, Wali Ur-Rehman.

Two counts filed in a District Court in Washington charge Mehsud with conspiracy to murder US citizens abroad and conspiracy to use a "weapon of mass destruction"—the home-made suicide bomb used by the CIA contact who carried out the attack. The charges carry a sentence of life in prison, but a US official told Reuters that they "are meant to deal with Hakimullah if he's captured. ... He can face justice in other ways too. That hasn't changed." In other words, the CIA and US military are still seeking to murder Mehsud using missiles launched from remote-controlled Predator drones.

Tehrik-e-Taliban, also referred to as the Pakistani Taliban, was formed in 2007 to unify tribal and Islamist resistance against the Pakistan government and the US-NATO occupation of neighbouring Afghanistan. Based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of South and North Waziristan, it supports Afghan insurgents who use the Pashtun tribal areas along border as safe havens.

The group has carried out numerous attacks in Pakistan, including a sustained assault on the US consulate in Peshawar in April that killed six people. It has organised attacks on truck convoys taking supplies to US and NATO forces from Pakistani ports. Mehsud is also accused by the US of organising the failed attempt by US citizen Faisal Shahzad to set off a car bomb in New York's Times Square in May.

The organisation has killed hundreds of civilians. Most recently, in a phone call to Aljazeera TV, Mehsud claimed responsibility for last week's suicide bombing of a Ramadan procession of Shiite Muslims in Lahore that killed at least 33 people and wounded hundreds more. Qari Hussain, a senior member of the Pakistani Taliban, also claimed responsibility for an attack on a Shiite rally in Quetta last Friday, which left at least 59 people dead and 160 injured. The Tehrik-e-Taliban is one of several Sunni jihadist groups which target Pakistan's minority Shiite population.

Such terrorist attacks are completely reactionary. They inflict death and suffering on innocent civilians and serve only to divide and disorient the population along sectarian lines. Washington's charges against Mehsud, however, are utterly self-serving. The US government and military, aided by the corporate media, are once again seeking to justify a bloody and neo-colonial war against the Afghan people and an expanding proxy war inside Pakistan as a "war on terrorism".

Announcing the charges against Mehsud, State Department ambassador-at-large for counter-terrorism Daniel Benjamin accused Tehrik-e-Taliban of having a "destabilising effect in Pakistan's tribal areas", that had "resulted in innumerable civilian deaths and considerable property losses". The real cause of deepening instability in Pakistan is the US-led war in Afghanistan, which the Obama administration has extended to the FATA areas of Pakistan through drone missile attacks and demands that the Pakistani military intensify operations against Islamist groups.

Since August 2008, US Predator drone missiles have slaughtered an estimated 1,000 people in more than 110 attacks in Pakistan and devastated scores of villages, mostly in the Waziristan agencies inhabited by the Mehsud tribe. Already, more people have been killed by drone attacks in 2010 than in any other year since they began under the Bush administration in 2004.

Those killed in the bombing at FOB Chapman included senior CIA agents who were directly involved in picking targets for the Predator drone strikes. If Hakimullah Mehsud was involved in the carrying out the suicide attack, his most likely motive was to avenge the assassination of the previous Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud, in August 2009. The indiscriminate drone attack on his home killed not only Baitullah, but 32 other people, including one of his wives and children.

The US drone strikes have been marked by their criminal indifference to civilian casualties and have escalated dramatically since mid-August. Twelve people died on September 3 when missiles hit a house and a compound near the town of Miranshah in North Waziristan. This followed an attack on August 23 in the same area, which killed 20 people, including three women and four children.

Pakistani officials told Reuters that five more people were killed and several wounded in a missile attack in the Kurram tribal region on August 27. The victims were described as “militants” but their identities were not confirmed. On August 14, in the North Waziristan village of Essori, 13 people were killed and five injured when a missile hit their compound during prayers. Pakistani security officials told the AFP that those killed were “militants”, but added that their identities were not known.

Pakistan’s government officially opposes the US drone attacks, but according to Reuters it has “cooperated in planning at least some of the attacks, officials from both countries have said”. Under pressure from the Obama administration, the Pakistani government has waged a brutal war against the ethnic Pashtun tribal population. Major offensives last year into the Swat Valley, Bajaur and South Waziristan, killed thousands of civilians and drove hundreds of thousands from their homes. An offensive in the Orazkai agency in March displaced a further 200,000 people.

US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told reporters last month that the military has stopped pressuring Pakistan to launch a direct assault into North Waziristan, which would encounter bitter resistance from tens of thousands of fighters linked with the Mehsud tribe, the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network, a Pashtun insurgent movement that operates on both sides of the border.

The Pakistani military is, however, continuing to carry out bombing raids on behalf of Washington, in a bid to terrorise the population in the tribal agencies. The same day that the

US State Department announced its charges against Mehsud, Pakistani jets and helicopter gunships killed 17 alleged militants in the Kurram and Orakzai tribal regions and wounded at least 10 more. This followed air strikes the previous day that killed at least 60 people in several villages in Tirah Valley in the Khyber agency, which is a key route for US and NATO supply trucks to Afghanistan.

Pakistan’s *Daily Times* reported that a hospital and a mosque were destroyed, and “relatives of the victims staged a protest and shouted slogans against two federal ministers from the tribal area. They demanded an inquiry into the incident”. One resident, Jihad Gul, told the *Dawn* newspaper that he had seen the bodies of at least 20 women and children.

The Pakistani military callously dismissed the deaths, with one official telling the *Daily Times*: “Militants were using civilians and their families as human shields and there could be some civilian casualties but we do not know how many”. In April, the Tirah Valley was hit by an air strike which killed more than 70 civilians.

Last Wednesday, CIA spokesman George Little told the media: “We support any lawful means to hold this terrorist [Hakimullah Mehsud] accountable for what he’s done”. There is nothing lawful, however, about the US drone attacks that are killing hundreds of civilians or the murderous offensives being carried out on Washington’s behalf by the Pakistani military.

The decision to charge Mehsud is simply a smokescreen to justify the Obama administration’s criminal actions in pursuit of US strategic ambitions to dominate the key energy-rich region of Central Asia.



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