

US escalates killing on both sides of Afghanistan-Pakistan border

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Amid signs of increasing desperation in the nine-year US war in Afghanistan, Washington has simultaneously launched a major offensive against the country's second-largest city, Kandahar, and stepped up its attacks in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), escalating the bloodshed on both sides of the border.

Tens of thousands of US troops have been massed in southern Kandahar province, a stronghold of the Taliban, for an offensive aimed at crushing armed resistance in the area and imposing control by the occupation forces and the puppet government of President Hamid Karzai.

"Operation Dragon Strike," as the offensive has been dubbed by Washington, has already driven thousands from their homes and destroyed farmers' crops, as the US military levels wide swathes of land to remove improvised explosive devices.

A spokesman for the occupation, Brig. Gen. Josef Blotz, said Monday that the ground operation was proceeding with air support, increasing the threat of mass civilian casualties. He predicted "hard fighting" in the days and weeks ahead. The US troops, he said, "are destroying Taliban positions so they will have nowhere to hide. Once this is done, insurgents will be forced to leave the area or fight and be killed."

In practice, this means uprooting whole communities, since the armed opposition groups are an indigenous force with substantial support in the area.

Officials in Kandahar City report that over 1,000 families have arrived from the Arghandab valley and the Zheri and Panjwai districts to the west, having been driven from their homes by the US-led offensive. The Afghan authorities have been overwhelmed by the large number of internal refugees seeking aid and have appealed to the United Nations for assistance.

At least 18 US soldiers have been killed in Kandahar province since August 30. There are no reliable figures for the number of Afghans who have lost their lives since the onset of the American offensive, but reports of civilian casualties continue to mount throughout the country.

The Karzai regime has appointed a commission to investigate a US air strike that killed 31 Afghans last Friday. While occupation spokesmen claimed that all those who died were "insurgents," local residents demonstrated against what they charged was the slaughter of innocent men, women and children, and now the local governor has acknowledged that roughly half of the victims were civilians.

Meanwhile, the US military and the Central Intelligence Agency have dramatically escalated their shadowy war on the other side of the border in Pakistan. According to the *New York Times*, the number of missile strikes by pilotless drone aircraft has been doubled, with at least 21 having been conducted so far this month.

The Obama administration has come to rely heavily on this cowardly form of warfare. Since coming to office in January 2009, it has quadrupled the number of strikes that were carried out during the last year of the Bush administration.

According to Pakistani authorities, 708 people were killed in 51 drone strikes in 2009, and another 600 or more have died in the 75 such strikes carried out so far this year. This adds up to more than 1,300 slaughtered since Obama entered the White House. The overwhelming majority of the victims—referred to vaguely by officials and the media as "suspected militants"—are civilians, including women and children.

These attacks constitute war crimes. They are designed as extrajudicial killings, banned by

international law, and are directed against clearly non-military targets, including the homes of supposed “suspects,” which is likewise a violation of the Geneva Conventions. Those carrying out the drone attacks from air-conditioned cubicles thousands of miles away are CIA employees and private contractors, who, under international law, are not considered lawful combatants and are therefore subject to prosecution as war criminals.

In a qualitative escalation of the semi-covert war against the people of Pakistan, US Apache attack helicopters carried out attacks on supposed “insurgents” inside Pakistan over the weekend, killing at least 55 people. US military spokesmen claimed that the attacks were launched after an Afghan border outpost came under attack and therefore constituted “self-defense.” They also asserted that the raids were conducted under rules of engagement agreed to by the Pakistani government.

The fact that the aerial attacks were continued for two days makes a mockery of the self-defense claim. And Islamabad denounced the attacks as a violation of Pakistani sovereignty, while denying that there was any agreement allowing US forces based in Afghanistan to carry out attacks across the 1,500-mile border between the two countries.

The use of the helicopter gunships seems to be part of a deliberate policy of escalating the US intervention inside Pakistan. Citing unnamed US officials, the *New York Times* reported Tuesday that “Gen. David H. Petraeus, the top American commander in Afghanistan, has recently issued veiled warnings to top Pakistani commanders that the United States could launch unilateral ground operations in the tribal areas should Pakistan refuse to dismantle the militant networks in North Waziristan.”

US imperialism is facing a debacle in Afghanistan. The real state of the nearly nine-year war found vivid expression on Tuesday when the US puppet president, Hamid Karzai, burst into tears while addressing an audience in Kabul, telling his listeners that he did not want his son to grow up as a “foreigner,” a remark that appeared to anticipate his own overthrow and exile. His government, mired in corruption and implicated in the rigging of two successive elections, is widely hated by the Afghan people. Ostensibly, it is to uphold the authority of this odious regime that US troops are

killing, dying and committing horrific atrocities in Afghanistan.

In the face of overwhelming popular hostility to the US war—among both the Afghan and American people—the Obama administration and the Pentagon are moving not to end it, but rather to expand it. They remain determined to pursue the original goal underlying the invasion nine years ago, the assertion of US hegemony in the energy-rich and geo-strategically vital region of Central Asia.

The expansion of the war to achieve this aim threatens catastrophic consequences. The escalating US intervention into Pakistan can only further destabilize that crisis-ridden country, unleashing profound regional tensions that could draw a host of neighboring powers—including India, China, Russia and Iran—into the conflict, creating the conditions for new and far bloodier military conflagrations.

Obama, who won the presidency in 2008 largely by appealing to the broad antiwar sentiments of the American people, has proven to be, even more directly than his predecessor, the pliant representative and spokesman of the US military and intelligence apparatus and the ruling elite that it serves.

The fight to end the US wars and occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq—and to prevent the unleashing of the far more devastating wars that are now being prepared—can be waged only in a direct struggle against the Obama administration, the Democratic and Republican parties, and the financial aristocracy that they represent.

This struggle requires, above all, the building of a new leadership in the working class, based on the program of socialist internationalism, to unite the fight against war with the defense of jobs, living standards and democratic and social rights in a powerful movement against the profit system, the source of militarism.

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