

Pakistani attacks on NATO tankers deepen US crisis in Af-Pak war

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More than two dozen trucks and oil tankers carrying supplies for the US military offensive against Kandahar in Afghanistan were destroyed in two separate attacks Friday in southern Pakistan. The attacks compounded the crisis for the US and NATO occupation forces arising from the Pakistani government's closure the previous day of a key border crossing.

It is estimated that 80 percent of supplies to US, NATO and allied occupation forces in Afghanistan, including 50 percent of fuel, passes through Pakistan.

The Khyber Pass route that connects Peshawar in northwest Pakistan and Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan was closed to NATO supply convoys in response to two US air attacks on Pakistani military posts Thursday that killed three Pakistan Frontier Corps troops and wounded three others. Washington is continuing to justify these attacks, carried out by helicopter gunships inside Pakistan in flagrant violation of Pakistani territorial sovereignty, as “self-defense”.

These attacks followed US helicopter strikes on the Pakistan side of the border the previous weekend that killed an estimated 55 Pakistanis. Last month the US sharply increased its use of CIA drones to fire missiles on alleged Taliban and Al Qaeda targets in Pakistan's tribal regions, launching 20 or more such attacks in September.

Speaking of the potentially dire implications of the border closure for the neo-colonial war in Afghanistan, Teresita C. Schaffer, director of the South Asia program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, told the *New York Times*, “We have been trying for a couple of years to decrease our logistical dependence on Pakistan, and have only managed to get it to 80 percent from 90 percent. So, no, we clearly don't have anyplace else to go.”

Early Friday morning, about a dozen masked gunmen

attacked a convoy of oil tankers parked in the town of Shikarpur in southern Sind Province. The insurgents fired into the air to warn off the drivers and then torched the vehicles, destroying 27 in all. It was the first such ambush in this part of Sindh Province.

Later on Friday, armed militants set fire to two NATO vehicles in the southwestern city of Khuzdar in Baluchistan Province.

The trucks targeted in both attacks were following the route from the port city of Karachi to the border crossing at Chaman, which connects to the road to Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city and longtime Taliban stronghold. Last week the US launched its biggest military offensive since the 2001 invasion against Kandahar and its environs.

The Pakistani regime has not closed the Chaman border crossing to US and NATO convoys. At the northern crossing point in the town of Torkham, however, local officials said Friday that some 400 NATO trucks were lined up.

The site of Friday's insurgent attacks suggests a deliberate strategy to disrupt supplies traversing the route that remains open and leads to Kandahar, compounding the problems for occupation forces arising from the closure of the northern route.

In another sign of the expanding insurgency in Pakistan, police reported Thursday that 200 militants had seized a dozen policemen and were holding them hostage in what was described in the press as the “normally placid” Chitral district near the Afghan border.

Washington's escalation of military operations inside Pakistan has increased tensions between the two countries while compounding the already desperate political crisis of the government of President Asif Ali Zardari. The latter has tacitly accepted the CIA drone

attacks in the tribal regions bordering Afghanistan, but has sought to draw the line at open US military incursions by air or on the ground.

Popular outrage in Pakistan against both the United States and the government in Islamabad, increasingly despised as a puppet of Washington, has been further inflamed by the most recent US attacks. Unrest is also growing over the government's failure to provide relief to the millions of Pakistanis displaced by this summer's floods.

At the same time, the US is increasing pressure on Zardari and the Pakistani military—in part by means of the recent military strikes—to expand their offensive against anti-government and anti-US forces in the tribal regions and South Waziristan into North Waziristan, claimed by the US to be the central base for Taliban operations across the border in Afghanistan.

On Friday, the Pakistani ambassador to Belgium lodged an official protest with NATO headquarters in Brussels over the recent US-NATO incursions. Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani told the Pakistani parliament that the government would “consider other options if there is interference in the sovereignty of our country.”

The *New York Times* reported Friday that a senior Pakistani intelligence official had said the border incursions could lead to a “total snapping of relations” between Islamabad and Washington. At the same time, there were reports of attempts to settle the dispute by establishing a joint investigation into the US strikes.

In 2008, Pakistan closed a border crossing for several days after US aircraft bombed a Pakistani post in the tribal area of Mohmand. Eleven Pakistanis were killed in that incident.

There have been reports in the American press in recent days of mounting dissatisfaction within both the US government and the Pakistani military with the Zardari regime, and discussions of an intervention by Pakistan's generals to purge the government and possibly remove Zardari himself.

The *Washington Post* Thursday quoted unnamed US officials openly discussing some form of military-backed coup. “US officials,” the newspaper wrote, “indicated they had begun to contemplate change, engineered through Mr. Zardari's resignation, the dissolution of the government, or a call for new elections under the constitution.

“Some suggested a new, more popular government with strong military backing might be better positioned to support US policies... ‘The best outcome here is that the instability will be taken advantage of by the military in ways that aren't bad, getting rid of lots of cronies,’ the official said.”



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