

US apologies for killing troops fail to halt Pakistan blockade

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US military commanders and diplomats have issued a series of formal apologies for a September 30 cross-border helicopter raid that killed three Pakistani frontier troops. This attempt to dispel mounting tensions between Washington and Islamabad has failed, however, to produce an immediate lifting of a blockade imposed on supplies passing through the country to US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan or stem a string of devastating attacks on US supply convoys.

The key Torkham Gate crossing through the Khyber Pass was kept closed for an eighth day Thursday, leaving close to 7,000 fuel tankers and other supply trucks stranded on Pakistani highways. More than 70 percent of supplies bound for the 152,000 US-led occupation troops in landlocked Afghanistan pass through Pakistan.

Ostensibly, the Pakistani government has halted the movement through the border crossing out of concern that it cannot guarantee security for the convoys due to the popular outrage over the US helicopter raid and the deaths of the Pakistani Frontier Scouts.

In practice, however, the closure has left the convoys sitting ducks for attacks. Scores of oil tankers and container trucks were destroyed in attacks on Wednesday. In the Nowshera district of Pakistan's northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, gunmen firing rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons set a convoy alight, damaging at least 54 tankers and container trucks.

In a separate attack, gunmen struck a NATO oil tanker convoy on the outskirts of Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province near the Durand Line border with Afghanistan. One driver was killed and at least 22 oil tankers were severely damaged. It was the sixth such attack since the closing of the crossing.

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a coalition of tribal-based militias allied with the armed groups battling the US-led occupation in Afghanistan, claimed responsibility for the attacks. A spokesman for the group said it was targeting the NATO convoys in retaliation for escalating CIA drone attacks in the Pakistan border region of North Waziristan. "We will further intensify attacks with the intensification of US drone strikes on us," the Tehrik-i-Taliban spokesman Azam Tariq told the Associated Press.

The BBC, however, cited Pakistani security personnel as speculating that some of the destruction may have been carried out by the owners of the trucks themselves as part of an insurance scam in which the fuel bound for the US troops in Pakistan is off-loaded and sold before the tankers are destroyed. The owners are

then able to claim insurance compensation for the vehicles as well as the fuel that ostensibly goes up in smoke.

Wednesday's apologies for the September 30 attack on the Pakistani border outpost followed a finding by NATO that contradicted the initial claims by the US military that its helicopter gunships were acting in "self defense."

A statement issued by the US-led occupation authorities found that "two coalition helicopters passed into Pakistan airspace several times. Subsequently, the helicopters fired on a building later identified as a Pakistan border outpost, in response to shots fired from the post." After attacking the border post at 5:30 in the morning, the helicopters returned at about 9 a.m. and fired seven more missiles at the Pakistani outpost.

"We believe the Pakistani border guard was simply firing warning shots after hearing the nearby engagement and hearing the helicopters flying nearby," US Air Force Brig. Gen. Tim Zadalis said a statement. The border post had been there since 2005 and was well known to the US military.

Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, issued a written apology to his Pakistani counterpart Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. "I want to send my most sincere condolences for the regrettable loss of your soldiers killed and wounded on 30 September near your border with Afghanistan," the US military chief wrote. He added that US commanders were reviewing the incident "with an eye toward avoiding recurrence of a tragedy like this."

US Ambassador to Pakistan Anne Patterson issued a similar "apology" through a press aide, paying tribute to Pakistan's "brave security forces" and vowing that the US would "coordinate with the government of Pakistan to prevent such tragic accidents from taking place in the future."

Gen. David Petraeus, the top US commander in Afghanistan, responded along similar lines, offering the "deepest sympathy and condolences to the families of those killed and wounded, to the Pakistan military, and the people of Pakistan." Petraeus also promised to "work with the Pakistan military and government to ensure this doesn't happen again."

Glaringly absent from all of these statements of sympathy and condolences was any apology for the blatant act of aggression and violation of Pakistani sovereignty that was carried out with the raids by the helicopter gunships. These had begun several days before the missile strike on the Frontier Corps outpost with an attack in which the US military claimed to have killed more than

50 “insurgents” on the Pakistani side of the border. Residents of the area described the victims as local tribesmen.

Rather than an unfortunate accident, the attack on the Pakistani outpost was part of a steady military escalation of the nine-year-old US war in Afghanistan and its widening into Pakistan, aimed at least in part at pressuring the Pakistani government to launch an offensive against anti-US occupation forces based in North Waziristan.

This has included an unprecedented number of missile attacks on targets inside Pakistan by CIA drones—a record 22 in the month of September alone—which are now taking place at the rate of about one a day.

The Pakistani government and military have been complicit in these drone attacks, providing intelligence for their targets and allowing the CIA to use a facility inside Pakistan to launch the pilotless planes. But the escalation of these strikes has provoked growing popular anger.

There have been approximately 150 drone attacks since the Obama administration took office, close to triple the number launched during George W. Bush’s two four-year terms. According to data reported late last month by a Pakistani researcher, Dr. Zeeshanul Hasan Usmani, US drone strikes have claimed a total of 2,063 civilian lives, while wounding another 514 Pakistanis. “To kill one terrorist you have to kill 57 Pakistanis,” said Usmani.

An opinion poll conducted in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) found that 75 percent of FATA residents are opposed to the drone attacks, while only 16 percent believe they accurately target “militants.” Of the more than 1,000 people polled, 48 percent believed the victims of the attacks were primarily civilians, while 33 percent said they killed both civilians and militants.

The poll, which was released Thursday by the New America Foundation, concluded that the “intensity of opposition to the American military is high.” It found, “While only one in ten of FATA residents think suicide attacks are often or sometimes justified against the Pakistani military and police, almost six in ten believe these attacks are justified against the US military.”

It is out of fear that these sentiments are threatening the stability of the Pakistani government itself that Islamabad has been forced to publicly condemn the drone attacks.

“We believe, strongly believe, that these drone attacks are counter-productive and not serving the larger strategic interests, especially in the context of our efforts to win hearts and minds which is part and parcel of our strategy against militants and terrorists,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Abdul Basit said on Thursday.

The statement came after another missile strike killed several alleged militants in North Waziristan earlier in the day. Two missile strikes killed at least nine people on Wednesday, and ten people, including eight described as German citizens, died in a missile strike on Monday. Basit said there was “no justification nor understanding” for these US military actions on Pakistani soil.

Further ratcheting up tensions between the US and Pakistan is a leaked confidential report from the Obama administration to the US Congress that is highly critical of the Pakistani government.

The document, ~~first~~ reported ~~Street~~ the Pakistani military of deliberately seeking to “avoid military engagements that would put it in direct conflict with Afghan Taliban or al-Qaeda forces in North Waziristan.” It described this as a “political choice,” rather than merely a question of lack of resources.

The report also derided Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari’s “decision to travel to Europe despite the floods” that have devastated the country and displaced some 8 million Pakistanis. It said that the population viewed the government’s response as “slow and inadequate.”

The document concluded, “Unless these challenges are overcome, the Government of Pakistan risks allowing the insurgency the opportunity to reestablish influence over a population that remains skeptical of its government’s staying power.”

In a separate article, the *Wall Street Journal* cited US officials as saying that members of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) are “pressing Taliban field commanders to fight the US and its allies in Afghanistan” in order to disrupt US efforts at brokering a peace deal between elements of the armed opposition groups and the US puppet government of President Hamid Karzai.

The alleged actions by the ISI were attributed to Pakistan’s determination to maintain “leverage” in any peace agreement and prevent the installation in Kabul of a government aligned with Islamabad’s traditional regional enemy, India. Pakistani officials denied the charge, accusing Washington of attempting to scapegoat the ISI and the Pakistani government for the crisis gripping the US war in Afghanistan.

In a further indication of the extreme tensions between Islamabad and Washington, the British daily *Guardian* on Thursday quoted Pakistan’s high commissioner in Britain, Wajid Shamsul Hasan, accusing the Obama administration of manufacturing the terror scare in Europe in order to justify its drone war on Pakistan and sell the Afghanistan war to an increasingly hostile US public. He indicated that the US had shared no intelligence with Pakistan confirming the allegations of alleged plots to attack European targets.

Hasan added that the US attacks were destabilizing Pakistan and leading to growing popular anger that he warned could rebound on the US.

“People feel abused,” the Pakistani diplomat said. “If they [the Americans] kill someone again, they will react. There is a figure that there are 3,000 American personnel in Pakistan. They would be very easy targets.” He added that the Pakistani air force base at Jaccobabad could prove vulnerable if tensions continued to mount. The base is the facility used by the CIA to launch its drone attacks.



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