

US drones slaughter 54 in Pakistan

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A series of CIA drone missile attacks Friday killed at least 54 people in Pakistan's Khyber tribal region near the Afghanistan border.

The attacks came just one day after Washington issued its formal review of US strategy one year after President Barack Obama ordered 30,000 more US troops into the Afghanistan war. In presenting its findings, Obama warned Thursday that "progress has not come fast enough" in terms of the Pakistani government attacking "safe havens" for Taliban insurgents in the border area.

Friday's drone attacks were among the bloodiest so far this year, in terms of a one-day death toll. The first of the attacks targeted two vehicles traveling in the Tirah Valley area of Sandana, killing seven and wounding another nine.

A second barrage struck a compound in the village of Speen Darang. According to unnamed Pakistani officials quoted by the Reuters news agency, the target of the attack, which killed 32 people, was a meeting of the Lashkar-e-Islam, a so-called Pakistani Taliban organization. And a third strike claimed 15 lives in the village of Narai Baba.

As in all such CIA drone attacks, the victims are described as "militants," but this has not been independently verified. Often, such reports have proven false, with evidence emerging that among those killed by the drone missiles are unarmed villagers, including women and children.

The series of attacks Friday were also significant for their location. The Khyber Agency, one of the eight separate agencies in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of northwestern Pakistan, has not previously been a major target of the drone campaign. There has only been one previously reported strike there, with Pakistani officials questioning whether it took place.

The Khyber agency includes the strategic Khyber Pass, the gap between the mountains separating Pakistan from Afghanistan through which one of the principal supply lines for US-led occupation forces in Afghanistan must pass. Truck convoys carrying fuel and supplies have been repeatedly attacked in the area by Taliban-linked organizations.

Until now, the CIA missile campaign has been focused on North Waziristan, further to the south.

The Obama administration and the American military have mounted an intensifying pressure campaign on the Pakistani government and military to launch a military offensive against North Waziristan, which is seen as a base of operations for armed opposition groups resisting the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, staged a surprise visit to Islamabad this week to push for military action.

"We want to solve it overnight," Admiral Mullen said in an interview with US journalists following his visit to Islamabad. "There is a strategic impatience on the part of myself and others. For the long-term relationship, there has got to be strategic patience. And there is a tension there. I think we both understand that."

The *New York Times* reported Friday that one of the conclusions drawn by the Obama administration in its policy review is that the US will launch its own offensive against Pakistan.

While officials said that the Pakistani authorities have given assurances that they will launch the long-sought operation in North Waziristan next year, "the real strategy appears to be for the United States to do most of the work itself—at least until the Pakistanis step up," the *Times* reported. "This means even more strikes using Predator and Reaper drones in Pakistan's tribal areas, and possibly carrying out Special Forces operations along the border."

Classified cables released by WikiLeaks last month revealed that small units of US Special Forces troops are already secretly operating inside Pakistan alongside the Pakistani military.

Officially, the government in Islamabad has maintained that any ground operations by American forces represents an unacceptable violation of the country's sovereignty. After US helicopter gunships carried out raids inside Pakistani territory last September, killing three members of the Pakistani Frontier Corps, the government retaliated by closing a key border crossing for the US supply route into Afghanistan, leading to a series of attacks in which dozens of NATO supply trucks were attacked and destroyed.

At Thursday's Pentagon press conference where the

policy review was presented, a top US officer raised the possibility of the US military sending troops across the border into Pakistan to attack “sanctuaries” of the Afghan armed resistance groups. Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. James Cartwright said that such “unilateral action” would be “an absolute last measure, because it has so many other impacts on the relationship that you’d really hate to end up in that position.”

The escalating CIA drone war has itself created growing hatred for US imperialism in Pakistan and mounting political tensions within the country.

The CIA’s station chief, identified as Jonathan Banks, was forced to flee the country on Thursday after his cover was blown by a lawsuit filed on behalf of victims of the drone attacks.

The case was formally filed on Monday by Kareem Khan, a journalist and resident of North Waziristan, whose son Zahirullah Khan and brother Asif Iqbal were killed in a drone attack last December. The charges filed named Banks, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates and CIA Director Leon Panetta as responsible for murder and terrorism.

“Jonathan Banks, operating from the US embassy in Islamabad, which is a clear violation of diplomatic norms and laws, as a foreign mission cannot be used for any criminal activity within a sovereign state,” the legal charges state. “According to news reports, he is also believed to be on a business visa, thus having no diplomatic status whatsoever.”

Khan called for the CIA official to be blocked from leaving the country and arrested for murder.

The Associated Press, which failed to name the station chief, explaining to its readers that he “remains undercover and his name is classified,” described Banks as “a secret general in the US war against terrorism” running the Predator drone program.

Kareem Khan and at least 15 other victims of the CIA drone attacks have staged a sit-in outside Pakistan’s parliament building over the past week demanding an end to the attacks and to the collaboration of the Pakistani government with the CIA and US military.

Several hundred demonstrated with them on December 10 carrying signs reading “USA, Leave us alone” and branding Washington as the “real terrorist.”

Among the demonstrators was 15-year-old Saddullah, who lost both his legs and one eye in a missile strike. “I was drinking tea with my family when it struck,” he told a McClatchy reporter. Three of his relatives died in the attack, including a wheelchair-bound uncle. Official reports of the attack listed the dead as Taliban commanders.

Also demonstrating was 13-year-old Saddam Hussain, who carried a large photograph of his 10-month-old sister,

who died in a missile attack on their home in the Datta Khel area of North Waziristan last October.

“The drones patrol day and night,” he said. “The sound comes when they fly lower down. Sometimes we see six in the air all at once. When they come down, people run out of their houses, even at night.”

Mohammed Faheem, an 18-year-old student also came to the demonstration from North Waziristan. He was critically injured in a January 2009 attack, losing his left eye.

“Three or four drones were flying overhead but we did not expect them to attack because we are not terrorists, why should they attack us?” he told the Pakistani daily *Nation*. “But suddenly, while we were having tea and chatting, the drones attacked us.” Seven people, including his cousins, died in the missile strike.

A report prepared by the *Nation* newspaper early this year based on information supplied by Pakistani government officials found that 44 Predator drone attacks carried out by the CIA in 2009 killed 708 people. While Washington and most of the media routinely described the victims as “militants,” the report found that only five of the strikes killed Taliban or al-Qaeda leaders, while 700 innocent civilians lost their lives.

“For each Al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorist killed by US drones,” the *Nation* reported, “140 innocent Pakistanis also had to die. Over 90 percent of those killed in the deadly missile strikes were civilians, claim authorities.”

This year, the Obama administration has more than doubled the number of drone missile attacks, with at least 110 having taken place so far. The threat to escalate this murderous campaign even further will mean an even greater civilian death toll and a further political destabilization of Pakistan.



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