New Year begins with multiple US missile attacks in Pakistan

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The New Year began with three separate US missile attacks on targets inside northwest Pakistan, as the Obama administration intensifies an illegal cross-border war that took the lives of more than 2,000 people last year, according to published estimates in the US and Pakistan.

Nine people were killed in the first missile attack, which struck a moving vehicle in the North Waziristan tribal region, the main focus of US attacks. Two hours later, US drones fired more missiles at people attempting to retrieve the bodies of the victims of the first attack, and five more died.

A third attack on Saturday evening hit another moving vehicle in North Waziristan, killing at least four more. Less than 24 hours earlier, four US missiles hit another group of vehicles in the same region, killing at least eight.

The more than two dozen killed over the weekend is only a small fraction of the total death toll on the Pakistani side of the border with Afghanistan. Both US and Pakistani sources say that the total number of strikes using missiles fired from Predator drones was approximately 120 in 2010, double the number in 2009, with estimates of the death toll ranging from 1,200 to 2,100.

While the US government typically classifies all the victims of the drone attacks as "militants" and "terrorists," Pakistani sources suggest that the majority, perhaps the vast majority, are innocent civilians, including hundreds of women and children.

While the Predator drone strikes in 2009 were divided roughly equally between the adjacent districts of South Waziristan and North Waziristan, the Pakistani army offensive into South Waziristan in October 2009 shifted the focus of the missile strikes almost entirely to North Waziristan. This is the last area in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas where guerrilla groups opposed to the US occupation of Afghanistan still have relatively free rein.

In a speech to Pakistan's National Assembly Monday, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani condemned the latest drone attacks as "counterproductive," claiming, "Our military and political leadership had very ably alienated local tribesmen from the militants but when a drone attack is carried out, they get reunited again."

Top Pakistani officials have made such statements repeatedly, but they are entirely for domestic political consumption. According to a secret US diplomatic cable released last month by WikiLeaks, Gilani told US diplomats at a meeting in August 2008 that he had no problems with drone strikes if they targeted what he called the "right people."

Gilani was compelled to address the WikiLeaks revelations during an unprecedented live telecast from the Prime Minister's House January 1, claiming that the cables were concocted and did not reflect his discussions with the Americans.

He rejected calls by political opponents for direct action by the Pakistani military in reaction to the missile attacks. "Pakistan is a responsible nuclear state which cannot take any irresponsible step to stop US Predator attacks," Gilani said, raising the chilling prospect that a US-Pakistan conflict could escalate out of control.

He added, "We are, however, confident that we will be able to persuade the world and the US to stop the drone attacks as they affect attempts to isolate militants from non-combatants."

While Gilani attempted to present his government as an opponent of the missile strikes, press accounts suggest that the collaboration between Islamabad and

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Washington is intensifying.

The English-language Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* cited government and security sources for a report that the CIA's "enhanced ability to hit moving targets in the lawless North Waziristan tribal region indicates the effectiveness of real-time intelligence provided by human assets on the ground." The newspaper added that "this huge turnaround in terms of intelligence gathering for the CIA in North Waziristan, once termed an 'intelligence black hole,' could not have come about without the explicit consent and acquiescence of Pakistan's security apparatus."

The newspaper commented, "If true, this would demonstrate a contradiction between Pakistan's publicly stated opposition to drone strikes in the tribal region and covert support for the CIA in identifying targets."

American press reports, meanwhile, suggested an escalation of ground operations both along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and into the tribal territories. The *New York Times* reported December 28, "American commanders recently have been seeking even more latitude to operate freely along the porous border, including inside Pakistan."

The *Washington Post*'s columnist on intelligence issues, Jeff Stein, wrote December 30 that the CIA has mobilized more personnel on the battlefield in the AfPak theater "than at any time since the Vietnam War," citing one insider's estimate that "many times more" CIA personnel than the 200 who operated inside of Laos during the early 1970s were on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Stein commented, "the Obama administration also seems to be betting that the CIA, even more than American military forces, can salvage the US struggle against the various strains of Muslim insurgents in the AfPak region, not to mention in places like Yemen, Somalia and North Africa."

On Sunday, a leading Republican senator, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, made the first public call for establishing permanent military bases in Afghanistan, in an interview on the NBC television program "Meet the Press."

Graham criticized the Obama administration's supposed June 2011 deadline for beginning troop withdrawals from Afghanistan—now effectively abandoned—and suggested that permanent US bases would insure that Afghanistan remained permanently under US influence.

"I think it would be enormously beneficial to the region as well as Afghanistan," he said. "We have had air bases all over the world. A couple of air bases in Afghanistan would allow the Afghan security forces an edge against the Taliban in perpetuity."

With amazing arrogance, Graham suggested that being occupied indefinitely by the United States was a privilege. "If the Afghan people want this relationship they are going to have to earn it," he said.

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