

US drone attacks provoke fury in Pakistan

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Thousands of people rallied on Sunday in Mir Ali, a town in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal agency, and in Peshawar, the capital of the country's north-west Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, in furious protest against a wave of US Predator missile strikes on homes and vehicles inside Pakistan.

Hundreds of Pashtun tribesmen spontaneously assembled for the Mir Ali demonstration. Just hours before, a Predator had stalked a car allegedly carrying four anti-US militants and incinerated it with Hellfire missiles when it parked in the village of Doga Madakhel. All the occupants were killed.

Two other Predator strikes followed. A motorcycle rider and two others were killed not far from Doga Madakhel, then at least six people were killed by another missile strike on a house near Miranshah, the largest town in North Waziristan.

Sunday's demonstration in Peshawar highlighted the growing fury in Pakistan over the US operations inside the country—which are gross violations of Pakistani sovereignty and war crimes under the Geneva Convention, which bans extrajudicial assassinations and the targeting of civilian housing and vehicles.

The Peshawar protest, organised by the Islamist Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) party, drew between 10,000 and 15,000 people. They rallied for six hours in front of the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa provincial parliament. English-language banners called for the arrest of Jonathon Banks, the head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operations in Pakistan whose cover was blown late last year. The Predators are remotely piloted by CIA operatives and contractors, often from bases in the United States itself.

JI leaders made rhetorical calls for the Pakistani government to prevent the US carrying out the attacks. Diplomatic cables made public by WikiLeaks last year, however, exposed that President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani fully support the Predator operations. Their occasional public opposition is entirely aimed at placating popular outrage over the US atrocities. Gilani declared in one meeting with US officials: “I don't care if they [the CIA] do it as long as they get the right people. We'll protest in the National Assembly and then ignore it.”

Even as the wave of drone strikes continued, President Zardari and the head of Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), held closed-door talks with CIA director Leon Panetta in Washington on January 14 to discuss the ongoing US operations.

Gilani issued a response to the latest attacks and demonstrations that only underscored the utter complicity of the Pakistani government in the killings. He called on the Obama administration to provide Pakistan with its own drones, so Islamabad itself could carry out the assassination and terror campaign. The US operations, he complained, were creating “hatred” toward his government and the Pakistani military.

Sunday's three attacks took the number of Predator strikes in the first weeks of 2011 to at least 10, making clear there will be no letup in the US carnage being inflicted on the tribal population of North Waziristan and other agencies that border US-occupied Afghanistan.

The Predator operations are ostensibly aimed at weakening the Afghan insurgency, whose predominantly ethnic Pashtun fighters are supported by

the Pashtun population of North West Pakistan. The anti-occupation resistance has been able to use the region as a safe haven to rest and resupply since the US invasion in 2001. Thousands of men from Pakistan's tribal agencies have also at times crossed the border to assist Afghan fighters in operations against US and NATO troops.

The majority of people who have been killed by the Predator strikes, however, are not Afghan fighters or Pakistani tribal militants, but civilians. Pakistani government sources have stated that Predators kill 50 civilians for every militant. Since the drone campaign dramatically escalated in 2008 and particularly after the coming to office of US President Barack Obama in 2009, well over 2,000 people have been slaughtered in Pakistan's north west. There were as many as 120 attacks last year.

More than 2,000 North Waziristan tribesmen rallied on Friday in Miranshah, in response to Predator attacks last week. Local leaders and clerics accused the US of waging an indiscriminate campaign of terror against the civilian population. They spoke of the climate of fear that prevails in the agency, with people scared to go to mosques or assemble in anything but small groups so as to not draw attention to themselves.

The Pakistani Taliban—Tehrik-e-Taliban—retaliated for the most recent Predator strikes with bombings yesterday in the cities of Lahore and Karachi. Such reactionary sectarian attacks on Shiite religious gatherings furnish the Pakistani government with a pretext for continuing its collusion with the US in its murderous activities.

In Lahore, a teenage boy reportedly approached a police checkpoint controlling entry to a religious procession and detonated a massive explosive strapped to his body. Nine people were killed instantly and more than 70 wounded. At least 20 suffered what hospitals classified as “critical injuries”.

Some 90 minutes later in Karachi, a man detonated explosives strapped to a motorcycle near a police patrol. One police officer and one civilian bystander were killed and several injured.

A spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban issued a statement to a local Lahore television station claiming responsibility for the attacks. He declared: “The attack was retaliation for drone attacks and military operations in tribal areas.” Warning of future bombings in Pakistan's cities, he claimed that “we have more than 3,000 trained suicide bombers”.

The Obama administration had been pressuring the Pakistani government to send tens of thousands of troops into North Waziristan, in order to root out Taliban fighters. Zardari had resisted due to concerns about the possible high casualties that the Pakistani military could suffer in the rugged terrain of Waziristan and the prospect of mass opposition to yet another US-dictated offensive against Pakistani citizens.

According to last week's *New York Times*, pressure for an offensive has been relaxed over recent months, as the Predator campaign has escalated. The US military has come to view the situation as having a “bright side”. Hundreds of Taliban fighters are said to be “bottled up” in North Waziristan, and, without any meaningful Pakistani government presence, everything that moves in the agency can be treated as a hostile target.

One CIA official told the *Times*: “Pounding the militants consolidated in the North Waziristan enclave with air strikes will leave the insurgents in a weakened state if the Pakistani offensive comes later this year.”



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