

Pakistan: CIA drone kills 25 on eve of mass protest against US missile strikes

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A US predator drone strike killed 25 people in the village of Spinwam in North Waziristan yesterday. According to a Pakistani government official, the dead included at least five children and four women.

In response to mounting public outrage, Pakistan's government has repeatedly denounced the US drone strikes in recent months, calling them "unhelpful" and urging that they be discontinued or at least massively scaled back. But the Obama administration and the Pentagon have brushed these complaints aside, publicly insisted that the missile strikes are a pivotal part of the AfPak War, and continued to mount such strikes at a rate of well over one per week.

While Washington postures as the foremost proponent of international law, it claims the right to violate Pakistani sovereignty at will, so as to carry out summary executions with callous disregard for civilian life.

Yesterday's missile strike came on the eve of a two-day mass sit-in against the drone attacks that its organizers claim will mobilize hundreds of thousands of people. Protesters—including persons who have been displaced by the drone strikes and the counterinsurgency war that the Pakistani military has mounted against anti-US militias in the tribal areas of Pakistan's majority-Pashtun northwest—are to take to the streets of Peshawar, with the stated aim of disrupting NATO shipments to Afghanistan.

Claiming it fears violence, Pakistan's government has announced that the US-NATO supply shipments will be suspended for the duration of the protest.

The capital of Khyber-Pakhtunkwa (the former North West Frontier Provinces), Peshawar serves as the administrative center for the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)—the site of virtually all the US drone attacks.

Peshawar is also the gateway to the Khyber Pass, a vital supply line for US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. While the US has gone to great lengths in recent years to develop alternate supply routes, the bulk of the food and fuel that supports the almost 150,000 US-NATO forces in Afghanistan still goes through Pakistan.

Today's anti-drone sit-in has been called by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice), a rightwing political

party founded and led by former cricket star Imran Khan

Speaking at a press conference Tuesday, Khan said that 90 percent of those killed in the US drone attacks are innocent victims of "state-sponsored terrorism." He accused Pakistan's "rulers" of selling "national sovereignty for US dollars" and said they were complicit in the drone attacks.

Indeed, despite its professed opposition to the attacks, the current Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-led national government has never demanded an end to the strikes at the UN or in any other international forum. Recently, Interior Minister Rehman Malik blurted out that the attacks cannot be stopped, a statement that only underscores the slavish subservience of Pakistan's government to the US. One of Pakistan's most senior officers unabashedly defended the drone strikes earlier this month. Major-General Ghayur Mehmood told a press briefing, "Myths and rumours about US Predator strikes and the casualty figures are many, but it's a reality that many of those being killed in these strikes are hard-core elements and a sizable number of them are foreigners."

Khan claimed that a consensus for taking action against the drone strikes had emerged as a result of the popular outcry and protests against the Washington's ultimately successful campaign to bully Pakistani authorities into allowing CIA operative Raymond Davis to leave the country. Davis had gunned down two Pakistani youth in a Lahore market in January, but the US insisted he enjoyed "diplomatic immunity." (See: CIA killer Raymond Davis released by Pakistani authorities)

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leader is vowing to pursue a "two-way strategy" to oppose the drone strikes "that are killing innocent civilians"—"public pressure with the country and litigations at international courts of law."

Several other rightwing and Islamic fundamentalist parties have announced their support for the anti-drone protest. These include the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Jamiat-Ulema-Islam-Fazl, both of which have historically enjoyed close relations with the military-security apparatus, and the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q). The PLM (Q) is the political party created by General Pervez Musharraf to provide a civilian-democratic fig-leaf for his US-sponsored military dictatorship. Under Musharraf, Pakistan became the logistical linchpin of the US

invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. At Washington's behest, the Pakistani military launched a counterinsurgency war in the historically autonomous FATA that is now entering its eighth year, and gave the CIA carte blanche to mount predator missile strikes in FATA.

These drone strikes, which have increased many-fold under Obama, have understandably become the focal point for the Pakistani people's opposition to the Afghan War and to the US neo-colonial domination of the country—a domination that is sustained through and epitomized by the alliance between the Pentagon and the Pakistani military.

That rightwing forces, including parties with intimate ties to the military-intelligence apparatus, are able to pose as leaders of the opposition to the drone-strikes speaks to the crisis of working class leadership.

Decades ago the bourgeois populist PPP renounced its anti-imperialist and pseudo-socialist rhetoric. The Benazir Bhutto-led governments of the late 1980s and 1990s implemented IMF restructuring, including privatization and social spending cuts.

In 2007, Bhutto and her husband, the current president Asif Ali Zardari, sought at the urging and direction of the Bush administration to strike a power-sharing deal with Musharraf, to help shore up his regime. If this bargain ultimately unraveled, it was not for any of lack of trying on the part of the PPP leaders, but because elements in the Musharraf regime, if not the General himself, balked at parting with any real power. Since coming to the head of an elected civilian government, the PPP has sought to keep the generals at bay by proving to Washington that it is an even more dependable ally in the Afghan War than they.

Yet the ostensible left in Pakistan—the trade unions, NGOs, and various pseudo-socialist organizations like the Pablot Labour Party of Pakistan and The Struggle—are all oriented toward pressuring the bourgeois PPP. In deference to it and the “liberal” bourgeoisie, they have failed to mount any systematic struggle to mobilize the working class, and through it the toilers as a whole, against the Afghan War and the reactionary US-Pakistani military-geo-political alliance.

Thus, the Pakistani “left” remained virtually silent on the Raymond Davis affair, allowing the religious right to “capture” the issue.

The government and militaries of both the US and Pakistan are trying to use the drone strikes and the popular anger that they have evoked to further their own reactionary interests; each seeking to prod the other into pursuing a strategic course more to their liking.

The US has long been urging Pakistan to launch a new military offensive against anti-US forces in North Waziristan. The drone strikes—and threats to have US military forces cross over into Pakistan—are meant to bully Islamabad into accepting that Pakistan must bear an even greater part of the burden, in terms of deaths, destruction of property and social dislocation, of the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Admiral Mike Mullen, the head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Pakistan this week. He is known in private talks to have pressed his Pakistani counterpart, General Kiyani, to launch an offensive in North Waziristan forthwith. But Mullen also gave a series of media interviews in which he suggested that the Pakistani military's reluctance to invade North Waziristan is bound up with its longstanding relations with the Afghan warlord and erstwhile US ally Jalaluddin Haqqani and his militia network.

“It is fairly well known, Mullen told the *Dawn*, “that ISI (the principal Pakistani intelligence agency) had a relationship with the Haqqani network and addressing the Haqqani network from my perspective is critical to the solution set in Afghanistan.” Mullen went on to add that the Haqqani question is at the “core—it's not the only thing— but [it's] at the core...[of the] most difficult part of the [US-Pakistan] relationship.”

The Pakistan military is as indifferent and hostile to the needs and well being of the Pakistani people as the Pentagon. In seeking to subjugate FATA it has used carpet-bombing, disappearances, and colonial-style collective punishments.

But like Washington, it is trying to exploit the drone strikes and the mass opposition to them in Pakistan to further its own reactionary ends. These include pressing Washington for more funds and weaponry, such as Predator drones, and a decisive say in Washington's end-game for Afghanistan.

As a result of the bloody US involvement in Afghanistan over the last three decades, the impoverished Central Asian country has become a major theatre in the bitter geo-political rivalry between India and Pakistan. Under conditions in which the US has forged a “global strategic” partnership with India and warmly welcomed its involvement in Afghanistan, the Pakistani military and ruling elite cannot but be concerned about the outcome of the Afghan War. They are therefore determined to use what leverage they have due to US dependence on Pakistani support to further their own predatory interests.

Only the Pakistani and international working class can and will spearhead a principled struggle against the Predator drone strikes, the Afghan war, and the longstanding conspiracy against the Pakistani people that is the Rawalpindi-Pentagon axis.



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