

Pakistan protests mount as Obama rejects apology for US strike

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Thousands of students in Lahore and other cities have continued to stage mass protests over the US raid last Saturday that claimed the lives of some two dozen Pakistani soldiers stationed at remote outposts on the Afghanistan border.

Even as popular outrage against the raid by US warplanes against Pakistani installations continues to mount, it was reported that President Obama has rejected a proposal from the US State Department that he issue a formal apology for the massacre.

The US ambassador to Islamabad, Cameron Munter, strongly advised the White House that a videotaped message by Obama expressing remorse for the killings was needed to stem the rapid deterioration of US-Pakistani relations, the *New York Times* reported Thursday.

While senior State Department officials concurred with Munter's recommendation, the proposal met with sharp opposition from the Pentagon, which floated a series of contradictory stories aimed at justifying the November 26 attack.

According to these various accounts, US special operations troops operating on the Afghan-Pakistani border came under fire either from Taliban elements near the Pakistani bases or from within the bases themselves and then called in close air support. An in-house investigation is being conducted by the US military's Central Command, which will likely produce a whitewash justifying the slaughter of the troops of Washington's supposed ally.

Asserting that US officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, have already offered their "deepest condolences," a spokesman for the National Security Council told the *Times* that "we are conducting an investigation into the incident. We cannot offer additional comment on the circumstances of the incident until we have the results."

The newspaper also cited unnamed administration officials who stressed concerns that "if Mr. Obama were to overrule the military and apologize to Pakistan, such a step could become fodder for his Republican opponents in the presidential campaign."

In other words, the White House response to the crisis unleashed by the killings is in line with the whole of the Obama

administration's militaristic foreign policy over the past three years: dictated by the military and shaped by the most right-wing political forces in the US.

In Pakistan, the killings on the border have unleashed immense anger from the population. They come on top of the Obama administration's sharp acceleration of the drone missile campaign that has killed and maimed thousands of Pakistanis, as well as earlier incidents—the covert US commando raid on Pakistan that ended in the assassination of Osama bin Laden last May, and the killing of two Pakistanis by CIA contractor Raymond Davis in January—that have underscored Washington's contempt for Pakistani sovereignty.

This contempt has been fed by the pliancy of the Pakistan government which, under the dictatorship of Gen. Pervez Musharraf, bowed to US threats and declared its support for Washington's "global war on terror," granting the US use of Pakistani air bases and carrying out bloody military operations in the northwest tribal regions at the Pentagon's behest. These policies, introduced behind the backs of the Pakistani people under military rule, have been slavishly followed by Musharraf's successors in the civilian Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government.

The response of this government and the military to the attacks on the border posts is indicative of their concern that outrage within the population could unleash uncontrollable political unrest.

Thus, Pakistan's foreign minister, Hina Rabbani Khar testified before a Pakistani Senate foreign affairs committee, declaring that "enough is enough," and that Islamabad would "not tolerate any incident of spilling even a single drop of any civilian or soldier's blood."

In a thinly veiled threat that the government would withhold further cooperation with Washington, she added, "The sacrifices rendered by Pakistan in the war on terror are more than any other country. But that does not mean we will compromise on our sovereignty."

The Pakistani Senate committee is supposed to issue recommendations on Pakistan's future relations with Washington on Friday. It has been specifically tasked with reviewing the implications of an anticipated cutoff of US aid in response to a withholding of cooperation with the US "AfPak"

war.

In a separate interview with US National Public Radio, Khar insisted that the attack on the border posts was not “an isolated incident” and that “at best, giving the benefit of the doubt, our soldiers lost their lives to an extremely callous attitude.” She pointed out that the attacks unfolded over the course of hours, warning that if it was a “deliberate attempt,” the questions it raised for the Pakistani government were “much, much, much more serious.”

A senior Pakistani military commander charged that the US attack was indeed a deliberate and “blatant act of aggression.” Major General Ishfaq Nadeem, the director general of military operations, recounted that the US and NATO knew the location of the two posts, and that there had been communications between the US and Pakistani military in the course of the airstrikes. Even after NATO was warned that Pakistani military installations were under attack, the bombardment continued.

“The helicopters appeared near the post around 15 to 20 minutes past midnight, opened fire, then left about 45 minutes later,” Nadeem said. “They reappeared at 0115 local time and attacked again for another hour.”

The long-established outposts were 2.5 kilometers inside Pakistani territory and were located just 300 meters apart on two prominent ridges. It was “impossible that they did not know these to be our posts,” Nadeem said, according to the Pakistani daily the *News*.

The Pakistani government has announced a series of measures in response to the border killings. It has closed the two main border crossings between Pakistan and Afghanistan—Torkham near the Khyber Pass and Chaman in the south—cutting off key supply routes for US-NATO forces. There were also reports that banning the landing of ships carrying materiel for the US-led occupation in Afghanistan is under consideration.

While until recently the bulk of supplies for Afghanistan’s foreign occupation troops came through Pakistan, Washington, conscious that growing popular hostility to the US war within the country could disrupt supply lines, has reduced the share to 30 percent, with the rest coming by air and from the north, through Russia and Central Asia.

Islamabad has also ordered the CIA to vacate Shamsi airbase in Balochistan, used for launching drone air strikes, by December 11. And it has rejected appeals by US Secretary of State Clinton and German Chancellor Angela Merkel to reconsider its decision to boycott a December 5 Afghanistan security conference in Bonn.

Pakistan’s minister of information, Firdous Ashik Awan, described the decision to boycott the conference in Germany as “a turning point in Pakistan’s foreign policy.”

Meanwhile, protests have continued every day since the US air strikes. Among the largest were those organized at the Punjab University in Lahore, where thousands of students, teachers and employees marched through the campus on

Wednesday and Thursday chanting “down with NATO” and “shame on the US.” The protesters raised the demand that the government withdraw all support for Washington’s so-called “war on terror.”

Similar demonstrations were organized in Multan, a city of 2.6 million, where demonstrators filled the Kachehri Chowk, a main square in the city. In Peshawar, school children demonstrated on Wednesday, and a protest encampment was set up outside the US consulate.

Malik Liaquat Tabbasum, the chairman of the Pakistan Thinkers Forum, one of the organizers of the encampment, told the media, “The government should immediately disassociate itself from the US-led war against terrorism, as the sole aim of NATO is to target our forces.” Protests were also reported in Sukkur, Dera Ghazi Khan and Kandhkot.

Some of the strongest denunciations of the US attack came from family members of the slain Pakistani troops. Speaking to the Pakistani daily *Dawn* from her home in Punjab province, Azra Bashir, whose son Usman, a 23-year-old captain, was killed in the raid, said, “I want to tell our soldiers that they should avenge the killing of Usman and other soldiers like him.”

Usman’s father, Bashir Ahmed, told the newspaper, “How long will we sacrifice our youths, our soldiers, for others? This is not our war. This is their war.”

Asfandiyar Khan, who spoke to the newspaper at the side of the grave of his 22-year-old son Najibullah, who was killed in the US attack, asked, “What kind of mistake is this that kills innocent poor people?”

Khan said of the United States, “You are calling us friends. Is this the way you people treat friends? If this is friendship, we have had enough, and don’t want such friendship.”

Even as Washington halfheartedly attempted to defuse the crisis, a fresh US killing was reported. Two Pakistani men from Chagai in Baluchistan were killed early Thursday inside the Afghanistan border, where they were reportedly gathering wood. Officials said that US helicopters fired on their vehicle.



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