

US steps up drone war on Pakistan

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US drone attacks in northwest Pakistan killed at least 14 people in little more than 24 hours, including 10 who died in a Thursday morning missile strike on a mosque.

The escalation of the US drone war comes in the wake of the NATO summit in Chicago, where the Obama administration and the Pakistan Peoples Party government of President Asif Ali Zardari failed to reach an agreement on the reopening of a supply route for US-NATO occupation troops in Afghanistan. The route, which goes from the port of Karachi to the Afghan border, was closed by Islamabad in protest over US air strikes that killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers last November.

The new drone strikes are the most lethal manifestations of Washington's displeasure at Pakistan's failure to rapidly bow to US demands. The aftermath of the summit has also seen threats in Congress to cut off aid to Pakistan and a hysterical political and media campaign over a Pakistani court's sentencing of a CIA informant who helped prepare the Navy Seal raid that ended in the assassination of Osama bin Laden.

Thursday's missile strike by a pilotless US drone demolished a mosque in Mir Ai Bazar, a village in the North Waziristan tribal area bordering Afghanistan. Local officials reported that the unmanned plane fired two missiles demolishing the building and leaving 10 dead and several others wounded.

"Fear prevailed in the area as almost five drones were seen flying in the air after the incident," local sources told the Pakistani daily *Nation*. The threat that the aircraft would fire more missiles prevented villagers from trying to rescue people from the rubble.

"The drone fired two missiles and hit the village mosque where a number of people were offering Fajr (morning) prayer," Roashan Din, a local tribal leader, told NBC News. He confirmed that 10 bodies had been

pulled from the wreckage of the mosque.

While US officials described the target of the attack as a "compound," multiple Pakistani sources have confirmed that the building hit was a mosque.

Doctors at the Mir Ali hospital reported that six wounded had been admitted, with one dying there and four others remaining in critical condition.

The missile strike follows another attack on Wednesday in which four people were killed and several others injured. As in all such attacks, the victims were described as "suspected militants." Wednesday's strike targeted a house near Miranshah, the capital of North Waziristan.

These drone attacks are deeply unpopular in Pakistan, where it is estimated that they have killed as many as 3,000 people, most of them civilians. The report of the destruction of a mosque and more civilian casualties will no doubt fan growing anti-American sentiments, further complicating the attempts of the Zardari government and the Obama administration to reach a deal on reopening the Pakistan supply route.

Pakistan's Foreign Office condemned the latest drone strikes, describing them as a "total violation" of Pakistani territory and sovereignty. Foreign Office spokesman Moazzam Khan characterized the US attacks as "illegal violations of international law and unacceptable." Asked by a reporter why Pakistan did not bring the matter to the United Nations, Moazzam stressed that Islamabad wants "to resolve the issue bilaterally." He described US-Pakistani ties as "an important relationship" and stressed that there is "a mutual desire" to reach an agreement between the two countries.

While the Zardari government has long issued public condemnations of the drone strikes, it had previously offered its tacit collaboration, going so far as to allow the Central Intelligence Agency to launch the pilotless aircraft from a landing strip inside Pakistan. Following

last November's strike on the Pakistani border posts, it forced the closure of this facility.

Further complicating US-Pakistani relations was the sentencing Wednesday of Shakil Afridi to 33 years in prison. Afridi, a Pakistani government doctor, was found guilty of treason for aiding the CIA in preparing the unilateral raid that sent Navy Seals deep into Pakistani territory to kill Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden last year. The raid was seen in Pakistan as a gross violation of the country's sovereignty and a humiliation of the government and the military.

Afridi organized a fake vaccination campaign in the Pakistani military garrison town of Abbottabad, where bin Laden was living, in an attempt to obtain DNA samples from family members and thereby confirm his identity. Having risen to the position of surgeon general in Khyber Agency, a tribal area along the Afghan border, Afridi had reportedly served as a paid CIA informant for several years.

The charges brought against Afridi included conspiring "to wage war against Pakistan or depriving it of its sovereignty," "concealing existence of a plan to wage war against Pakistan" and "condemnation of the creation of the state and advocacy of abolition of its sovereignty." He was tried under the Frontier Crimes Regulation, a legal system created under British colonialism to maintain control in the rebellious tribal areas. This legal code does not allow defendants to have a lawyer. Under a recent amendment of the old British code, however, they do now have the right of appeal.

The sentencing drew shrill protests from Washington and the US mass media, which characterized Afridi as a "hero" and a "patriot." Senators Carl Levin and John McCain, the chairman and top Republican on the Senate armed services committee, issued a joint statement calling the conviction "shocking and outrageous" and demanding that Islamabad pardon and release the CIA informant immediately. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said Wednesday that there was "no basis" for jailing Afridi.

The Pakistani Foreign Office said that Afridi had been convicted "in accordance with Pakistani laws and by Pakistani courts" and affirmed that Washington and Islamabad "need to respect each other's legal processes."

He did not raise the case of Syed Ghulam Nabi Fai, a

US citizen of Pakistani origin and former executive director of the Kashmiri American Council, who last March was sentenced to two years in prison after being found guilty of conspiracy for having worked for Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency.

Washington's characterizations of Afridi as a "hero" are not shared by the vast majority of Pakistanis, who see him as a traitor, nor for that matter by fellow health professionals, who see his actions as having done potentially catastrophic damage to efforts to eradicate polio and other diseases in Pakistan.

Afridi's theft of World Health Organization cooler boxes for use in a fake CIA orchestrated vaccination campaign have cast a cloud over all public health campaigns, raising suspicions that they could be fronts for US intelligence and state terror operations. Among the most immediately affected is Save the Children, the largest international aid agency in Pakistan. According to Pakistani officials, Afridi told his interrogators that he was put in touch with the CIA by Save the Children operatives.

Save the Children denies the claim, but its operations have been largely hindered, with employees denied visas, supplies stopped and senior officials forbidden from leaving Pakistan. David Wright, the country manager for Save the Children, denounced the use of a public health professional for US intelligence operations. "The CIA needs to answer for this," he told the *New York Times*. "And they need to stop it."

In a further indication of the continuing downward spiral of relations between the US and Pakistan, a Senate panel Tuesday passed a foreign aid budget that would slash US assistance to Pakistan by more than half. The Senate appropriations subcommittee on foreign aid voted to cut fiscal 2013 aid to Pakistan by 58 percent, while allowing for still further cuts if the supply route to Afghanistan is not reopened. There are growing demands in Congress for a complete aid cut-off. Pakistan has received some \$20 billion in US aid since 2001.



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