

US drone attacks escalate inside Pakistan

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The US is intensifying its drone attacks in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan, as the Pakistani army prepares a major military operation against Islamist militants in North Waziristan.

The latest attack on Friday involved missile strikes from CIA-controlled drones on three separate locations in North Waziristan. According to unnamed Pakistani intelligence officials, 18 “suspected militants” were killed. As in previous attacks, most casualties would undoubtedly have been civilians, including women and children.

The Associated Press reported that the strikes came just minutes apart on mud brick compounds located several kilometres from each other in the Shawal Valley. The area is mountainous and heavily forested, and serves as a crossing point into Afghanistan for insurgent groups opposed to the US-led occupation.

Citing local tribesmen, the Pakistani newspaper, *News International*, reported: “The people who helped retrieve the bodies from the debris of the collapsed buildings said all the bodies had been burnt and torn into pieces. They said the bodies were beyond recognition.” Some 14 injured people were taken to local health facilities, where doctors reported that most were in a critical condition.

The drone attacks, in blatant violation of Pakistani sovereignty, came less than 24 hours after Islamabad had issued a formal protest to an unnamed senior American diplomat over attacks earlier in the week. A Pakistani foreign ministry spokesman described the drone strikes as “illegal and unproductive” during a press briefing last Friday.

Washington simply ignored the protest—the eighth in the 12 months—as the Pakistani government and military give their tacit approval to the drone strikes. The formal protests are a threadbare attempt by the government to placate widespread public anger, especially in the FATA region, over the relentless US attacks.

At least four CIA drone attacks took place last week in North Waziristan. On August 18, drone missiles struck an alleged militant hideout, killing at least five people claimed to be allies of a local warlord, Hafiz Gul Bahadur. The following day, US drones fired missiles, killing 10 “suspected militants” in two separate strikes.

Another strike took place on Tuesday last week. US and Pakistani officials claimed on Saturday that Badruddin Haqqani, the head of operations for the Haqqani network, had been killed in the attack. A senior Pakistani intelligence official told Reuters that Badruddin had fled a compound after it was hit by a missile but was killed by a second drone strike on a car in which he was travelling. An Haqqani militia spokesman denied that Badruddin was dead.

The Haqqani network is just one of the tribal militias waging war in neighbouring Afghanistan against the US-led occupation. Badruddin is believed to have masterminded several high-profile attacks in Kabul, including one on embassies and the parliament in April that lasted for 18 hours. While the US State Department has branded most of the Haqqani leaders individually as “global terrorists,” it has yet to designate the network as a whole as a terrorist organisation, as that would preclude ongoing attempts to establish negotiations.

Washington has long demanded that the Pakistani army launch a military offensive in North Waziristan, along the lines of its brutal operations in other FATA agencies. In 2009, the military sent 30,000 troops, backed by war planes and heavy artillery, into South Waziristan, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee. The US has accused the Pakistani military of refusing to do the same in North Waziristan in order to protect relations between the Haqqani network and the military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency—claims that have not been substantiated.

Relations between the US and Pakistan were severely strained by the unilateral US attack deep inside Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011, followed by US airstrikes last November that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. Facing a public outcry, Islamabad shut down NATO supply routes through Pakistan to Afghanistan.

The Pakistani government is in deep crisis after the Supreme Court's removal of Yousuf Raza Gilani as prime minister in June for failing to ask Swiss authorities to reopen corruption charges against President Asif Ali Zardari. His replacement, Raja Pervez Ashraf, also faces removal for refusing to do the same.

Both the Pakistani government and the military are heavily dependent on Washington. The standoff over the NATO supply routes ended with the reopening of the routes last month. The US extracted other concessions, including Pakistan turning a blind eye to escalating drone strikes and tentative agreement from its military to start an offensive into North Waziristan. These military operations will fuel popular resentment, further destabilising the country.

Pakistani military officials have said operations would only slowly increase pressure on militants in North Waziristan, unlike its massive offensives in other FATA areas. Local residents told the *Dawn* newspaper that hundreds of foreign fighters from Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were fleeing the area late last week in anticipation of military operations.

The intensified US drone attacks inside Pakistan are aimed at terrorising the local population and pressing the Pakistani military to go ahead with its offensive. Local residents told *News International* after last Friday's strike that they feared trying to rescue survivors as drones kept circling. Rescuers and those attending funeral services have been targeted previously for attack on the basis that they are also "suspected militants."

An extraordinary article in the *New York Times* in May revealed that President Obama is personally involved in the decisions to carry out the targeted assassinations of individuals inside Pakistan, as well as other countries. The revelation underscores the criminal character of the Obama administration and its neo-colonial operations in Afghanistan.

According to one estimate, there have been 33 drone strikes inside Pakistan this year, down from 117 in 2010 and 64 in 2011. As the Obama administration prepares for the withdrawal of US combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, it will undoubtedly step up its murderous attacks in both Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to shore up its puppet regime in Kabul.



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