

US steps up Pakistan drone murders amid crackdown over school attack

Alex Lantier

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Eight people died yesterday in two drone strikes in North Waziristan, a remote and impoverished area of Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan.

US officials are increasingly reluctant to discuss Washington's barbaric drone murder program, as it has been condemned by the UN for violating international law and is seen as deeply sinister by masses of people worldwide. US officials refused to comment on the two strikes. However, Pakistani intelligence officials confirmed that both attacks in North Waziristan were drone strikes.

One strike killed five people in a compound suspected of serving as a base for the Pakistani Taliban, the group that carried out a December 16 Peshawar school attack in which 150 people were killed. The other strike killed three people who allegedly belonged to the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

Pakistani intelligence notoriously calls all drone strike victims "terrorists," and it was impossible to independently verify their claims that the strike victims belonged to the Pakistani Taliban or IMU.

North Waziristan has been the target of intense drone warfare, as Washington has sought to crush resistance to the NATO occupation of Afghanistan. Hundreds have died in raids on schools, farmhouses, funerals, and medical aid teams rushing to assist the victims of other US drone strikes.

In the first half of 2014, Washington suspended its drone murder program, which claimed over 2,200 lives in Pakistan, provoking escalating popular opposition to US war operations, divisions between Washington and Islamabad, and mass protests inside Pakistan. US drone strikes restarted, however, as the Pakistani army launched its Zarb-i-Azb operation in June against Taliban fighters in North Waziristan. Sixty percent of the population, that is, several hundred thousand people, fled the region after the Pakistani army warned it would treat anyone who

stayed as terrorists.

There have been approximately two dozen drone strikes since then, and the pace of US drone murders has accelerated since the horrific Pakistani Taliban attack of December 16 on a military-run public school in Peshawar. The attack led to the death of 150 people, including 130 children.

Last Saturday, another drone strike in Datta Khel, North Waziristan killed six. In a separate operation on Thursday, the Pakistani army killed a man they identified as "Saddam," who they claimed had been involved in planning and coordinating the Peshawar school attack.

Working closely with US imperialism, the Pakistani regime is seizing upon the Peshawar school attack to impose military rule in all but name. On Tuesday, US General John F. Campbell, the commander of NATO occupation forces in Afghanistan, came to Islamabad with Afghan Army Chief of Staff General Sher Mohammad Karimi to discuss the operation.

After they left, a series of draconian measures were announced in quick succession, as part of the National Action Plan adopted after the Peshawar attack. They aim to install a regime of terror to silence all opposition to the Pakistani ruling elite's collaboration with US imperialism's occupation of Afghanistan.

Late Wednesday, after an all-day meeting of his government, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif set up military tribunals to try terror cases. This effectively suspends the civilian judiciary system, whose officials have been involved in protests against collaboration with US war operations by the army and the executive.

In the next two days, the government announced plans for a mass roundup of 6,500 people across Pakistan on terror charges, and for mass executions of 500 people held in Pakistani jails. Such operations will be carried out by a federal counterterrorism force controlled by the Ministry of Defense, working with Pakistan's powerful military

intelligence agency as well as civilian security forces.

A civil judge on Friday issued a non-bailable arrest warrant for Abdul Aziz, a cleric at the Lal Masjid mosque, who had refused to condemn the Peshawar school killings.

The Sharif government is also carrying out a mass clampdown on the media and the financial system. It announced that the publication of “hate material” would be banned and punishable by law. The State Bank of Pakistan, meanwhile, was instructed to freeze all bank accounts deemed to be involved in the financing of terror activity.

“We have to act fast and whatever is agreed, we have to implement it immediately,” declared Sharif, who hailed the decision to institute military courts as a “historic moment” for Pakistan.

The opposition Pakistani People’s Party (PPP) quickly dropped counterproposals to install military tribunals only for a specific time period and aligned itself with Sharif’s positions. Senior PPP official Aitzaz Ahsan said, “We are for speedy punishment of terrorists, and if the draft legislation for military courts is shared with us, we can work out a way within a constitutional and legal framework.”

The Balochistan National Party’s Hasil Bizenjo also praised the initiative for military courts, declaring, “We have to fight the mindset, and stopping now will lead to perpetual failure. If we lose, the next rulers will be the Taliban.”

Senator Mushahid Hussain of the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-i-Azam group) applauded the measures, pointing to the support he expected from Washington. “I fully support this move; the US has also done the same in the past,” he said, apparently referring to Washington’s use of military tribunals to try people captured overseas on terrorism charges.

US drone murder and the NATO powers’ encouragement of the slide towards military rule in Pakistan testify to the criminalization of imperialist foreign policy. To crush broad resistance to their neocolonial war in Afghanistan and prop up their tottering client state in Pakistan, the US and NATO are resorting to murder and terror unchecked by any form of judicial process.

Obama, in particular, has continued and intensified the criminal policies of his predecessor, George W. Bush. This month, the population of the United States and the world was horrified by the US Senate report’s official confirmation of the widespread use of torture by the CIA

against those it accused of terrorist activities. The report demonstrated the necessity of bringing criminal charges against top officials of the Bush administration.

The Obama administration, however, has only compounded the criminality of its predecessor, trying to avoid detaining and interrogating terrorism suspects by murdering them outright, without trial, through drone strikes. It was widely reported that President Obama personally supervised the drawing up of “kill lists” for America’s aerial death squads in White House meetings dubbed “Terror Tuesdays.” Last year, Attorney General Eric Holder suggested that drone strikes could be used for extrajudicial killings of US citizens inside the United States.

The Obama administration’s policy remains shrouded in secrecy and itself demands the bringing of criminal charges against the current occupant of the White House. However, even the limited information publicly available makes clear that extrajudicial drone murders have led to massive losses of innocent lives.

In a recent report titled “You Never Die Twice: Multiple Kills in the US Drone Program,” the British human rights organization Reprieve estimated that US drone strikes aimed at 41 terrorism suspects in Pakistan and Yemen had led to deaths of 1,147 people. Each suspect was “killed” an average of three times, with one suspect being targeted for drone killings seven times.

The CIA’s unsuccessful strikes against Ayman al Zawahiri, who reportedly took over leadership of Al Qaeda after the killing of Osama bin Laden, led to the deaths of at least 105 people, including 76 children and 29 adults. These attacks failed, and Zawahiri is still alive.



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