

Continuing US air strikes in Pakistan's tribal agencies

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US aircraft are attacking alleged militant targets inside Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA) at a growing rate. A strike on a housing complex in North Waziristan last Friday was the eighth since the beginning of September and the second last week.

The US military formally denied any knowledge of Friday's air strike, in line with Washington's claim that it "respects" Pakistan's national sovereignty. Pakistani intelligence sources, however, told Western journalists that two missiles fired by a remotely-controlled Predator aircraft had destroyed several houses in Muhammad Khel, a village located not far from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The sources alleged that said at least 24 people were killed, including 16 Arab Islamic militants, five supporters of Afghanistan's former Taliban regime and two women and a child.

The US air strikes have killed and maimed dozens of people in the FATA. On at least two occasions Pakistani border guards and tribesmen into opening fire on approaching American aircraft. A series of formal protests by Pakistani authorities, however, have been little more than a smokescreen to obscure their complicity in the American military's campaign of assassinations and terror.

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* last week, the newly-installed president of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari, all but admitted that the killings were taking place with his blessing and the agreement of the government headed by Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani. "We have an understanding [with the US], in the sense that we're going after an enemy together," Zardari stated. Gilani's defence secretary, Kamran Rasool, told a parliamentary committee on October 7 that the government had consented to US air strikes.

The autonomous and largely self-governed Federally Administrated Tribal Agencies are home to some three million ethnic Pashtuns who still adhere to tribal ways of life and have centuries-old ties with the Pashtun population over the border in Afghanistan. Since the US-led invasion seven years ago, the region has been a natural safe-haven for

Afghan insurgents who are fighting a war of resistance against the foreign forces-as it was during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1988.

North and South Waziristan are among the main staging bases for the large Pashtun tribal force led by Jalaluddin Haqqani, an ageing warlord who was one of the main commanders of the Afghan mujahaddin who fought the Soviets and served in the Taliban government from 1996 to 2001. He and his sons are believed to be commanding much of the Taliban resistance. The Waziristan tribal leader and head of the Pakistani Taliban movement, Baitullah Mehsud, has close links with Haqqani. Between them, they can mobilise thousands of fighters.

Haqqani and other leaders of his network appear to be the main target of the US air strikes. An attack on a housing complex and school on September 8 killed Haqqani's wife and sister, several other women and at least four children who most likely had some blood relationship with the warlord. None of the male members of the family were present at the time. No information has been released by the Taliban regarding the identity of those killed in last Friday's attack. However, locals told the Associated Press that the furious reaction by militants in the area suggested that a leading figure may have been among the dead.

The Pakistani *Daily Times* reported yesterday that tribesmen fired rocket propelled grenades at Predator drones on Tuesday, as the unmanned aircraft flew near the town of Miranshah in North Waziristan. A housing complex in the town was destroyed by US missiles on September 12, killing a number of civilians.

While the US steps up its air war inside Pakistan, Zardari and Gilani have essentially been pressured by the Bush administration to intensify Pakistani military operations against tribal and Afghan militants in return for desperately needed aid. As much as \$4 billion may be required in coming months to avoid a total collapse of the currency and prevent Pakistan defaulting on its foreign debts. Last week, Washington assisted in brokering an emergency \$US500 million loan from the Asian Development Bank.

The focus of the fighting at present is the Bajaur agency, which borders the Afghan province of Konar. Since August, a military offensive based on indiscriminate aerial and ground bombardments has forced an estimated 400,000 people-or more than two thirds of the population-to flee from their homes. Dozens of villages have been razed to the ground, along with the livestock and crops that the subsistence tribal communities depend upon.

Despite claiming to have killed as many as 1,000 "Taliban" in the Bajaur operation so far, the Pakistani military still only controls 60 percent of the tiny agency. Militants are dug into well-defended fortified positions and have allegedly been reinforced by hundreds of fighters from Afghanistan. The reinforcements are believed to be Afghan Taliban as well as the Hezb-e-Islami movement of Pashtun warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Hekmatyar, a prominent mujahaddin commander who was Afghanistan's prime minister at various times in the 1990s, was driven from the country by the Taliban in 1997. After initially supporting the US invasion, he quickly began voicing opposition to the occupation. He went into hiding and called for armed resistance after the US military attempted to assassinate him in May 2002. Over the past seven years, he has rebuilt a base of support and is believed to command the guerillas fighting American troops in Afghanistan's eastern provinces.

Bajaur agency served as one of Hekmatyar's bases during the Soviet war and is still used by Hezb-e-Islami fighters. In a vindictive move, the Pakistani government last week gave 50,000 Afghan refugees inside the agency three days to leave, on the grounds that the civilian population was aiding the insurgents. Pakistani troops have been ordered to destroy their businesses and houses. Thousands of people have reportedly streamed over the border or are attempting to move to other parts of Pakistan.

The devastation in areas of Bajaur has prompted tribal leaders in the agency and other agencies to form lashkars or tribal militias to expel the Taliban from their areas-in the hope it will prevent the destruction of their homelands by the government. Militias have been formed this month in Bajaur, Mohmand, Kyber, Orakzai and Kurram.

A tribal leader in Bajaur, Fazal Karim, told a correspondent for Deutsche Presse Agentur: "We have been told very clearly by the authorities that the only way to avoid 'collateral damage' is that we clear our areas of Taliban and bring stability here."

There are widespread rumours that the US is pressuring Zardari and Gilani to order a military offensive against the Waziristan strongholds of the Pakistani Taliban and the Haqqani movement. Fuelling speculation, the Pakistani government this week officially denounced Baitullah

Mehsud as a "terrorist" and issued an arrest warrant and orders for the confiscation of all his property.

The military operations in the FATA are deeply unpopular among Pakistanis who oppose the US occupation of Afghanistan and sympathise with the resistance of the Afghan people. Any move into the Waziristans-with the inevitable bloody and costly fighting for both sides-would provoke greater outrage. There are already serious rifts within the ranks of the armed forces. Ethnic Pashtuns from the North West Frontier Province make up a large proportion of the 600,000-strong volunteer army and many resent being used to repress and terrorise the tribal communities.

Anger in Pakistan will only be heightened by claims that secret negotiations have been taking place between Afghan officials and the Afghan Taliban led by Mullah Mohammad Omar.

CNN reported on Monday that a meeting took place in Saudi Arabia between September 24 and 27 in which the Saudi monarch personally presided over talks involving representatives of the Taliban, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai. The Taliban allegedly used the meeting to declare it had broken off all relations with the Al Qaeda network of Osama bin Laden and was prepared to negotiate an end to the war. No representative of the Pakistani government was invited.

All sides have denied the report. This month, however, figures ranging from top British and US generals to Karzai and US Defense Secretary Robert Gates have all suggested that a negotiated peace with the Taliban is possible. In Pakistan, the obvious question is: should lives and resources be squandered in a war with Taliban militants in the FATA, when Washington is preparing to do a political deal with them?



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