

US resumes drone killings in Pakistan

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Washington ended a month-long pause in its campaign of drone attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas Sunday, killing four "suspected militants" in North Waziristan and provoking a formal protest from the government in Islamabad.

The strike by the remotely piloted aircraft on Miranshah, the capital of North Waziristan, part of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, expressed Washington's unconcealed contempt for the Pakistani government, which had publicly conditioned a resumption of its full collaboration in the so-called AfPak war on a halt to the drone attacks.

Pakistan's Foreign Ministry issued a formal statement saying that it "strongly condemns the US drone attack that occurred in North Waziristan today." The statement continued: "Such attacks are in total contravention of international law and established norms of interstate relations. The Government of Pakistan has consistently maintained that drone attacks are violative of its territorial integrity and sovereignty. The matter will be taken up through diplomatic channels both in Islamabad and Washington."

The drone strike comes on the heels of last week's negotiations in Islamabad between the Pakistani government and a US team led by US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Marc Grossman.

Pakistani officials had indicated Sunday that a deal was in the works in which Pakistan would agree to reopen its borders to the transport of materiel for the US-led occupation troops in Afghanistan in return for the payment of some \$1.1 billion in withheld coalition support funds, money which Washington and its allies had agreed to pay Islamabad for expenses incurred in counterinsurgency operations in the border region. No payments have been made since mid-2010.

The deal is of decisive importance for Washington, given that the route from Pakistani seaports to Afghanistan is far less costly than the alternative it has pursued through Central Asia to the north. Moreover, given the carrying through of a scheduled drawdown of large numbers of US and NATO troops, it will be next to impossible to ship out the huge quantities of vehicles, heavy weapons and other equipment that have been amassed in Afghanistan over more than a decade of war without access to the Pakistani supply routes.

One stumbling block in the negotiations was reportedly Islamabad's demand that Washington issue an unconditional apology for the slaying last November of 24 Pakistani troops in strikes by US attack helicopters and fighter jets against a border post inside Pakistan.

The Pentagon's story is that the incident was a result of "friendly fire," a mistaken clash in

which both sides bore blame. Pakistan's military has categorically rejected this account. In any case, the US military is strongly opposed to issuing any apology, holding Pakistan responsible for harboring forces fighting the US occupation of Afghanistan, in particular the so-called Haqqani network, which was blamed for the coordinated attacks in the center of Kabul and other areas on April 15.

The Obama White House is not about to cross the Pentagon on such an issue in an election year. Moreover, an apology would cut across the right-wing re-election campaign being waged by the Democratic Party, which is extolling the US Seal assassination of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan a year ago and suggesting that Obama is more militarily aggressive than his presumptive Republican rival Mitt Romney.

According to some reports, the US and Pakistan were prepared to work out some sort of face-saving statement that would fall considerably short of the apology, which had been set as part of the "terms of engagement" in a resolution approved by the Pakistani parliament last month.

The same resolution demanded an immediate halt to the drone strikes. Sunday's attack was the first on a target inside Pakistan since March 30. While Grossman left Pakistan Friday night with no agreement, Pakistani officials reported that a team of 10 US officials from the State and Treasury departments, the Pentagon and other agencies had remained in Islamabad to iron out an deal.

The latest drone strike, however, has made it more difficult to reach a bargain with Washington. The brazen attacks on Pakistani soil and the resulting loss of civilian lives has provoked widespread anger in Pakistan, which the country's ruling elite has had to take into account, even as the government has in the past collaborated with the drone campaign, going so far as to provide the CIA with a base inside Pakistan for the pilotless aircraft.

The *Washington Post* quoted an unnamed Pakistani government official as saying, "When a duly elected democratic Parliament says three times not to do this, and the US keeps doing it, it undermines democracy." In reality, what it undermines is the credibility of the government and its attempt to mask its continued dependence upon US imperialism, which treats it as a neocolonial subject.

The Associated Press quoted unnamed American officials as stating that Washington has "no intention of stopping the covert drone program in Pakistan."

The US intransigence on both the drone attacks and the apology for the November massacre of Pakistani troops appears likely to lead at least to a delay in any reopening of Pakistani supply routes to Afghanistan. It may also result in Pakistan boycotting a NATO summit meeting to be held later this month in Chicago, centering on future operations in Afghanistan.

The strike on Pakistan came on the same day that White House counterterrorism advisor John Brennan issued an unusual public defense of the CIA's drone missile attacks in various parts of the globe. While the drone campaigns have been widely reported in the media and are no secret in the countries where Hellfire missiles are claiming their victims, the official US position has been that it is a covert program, not to be officially acknowledged.

Appearing in Sunday television news interviews, followed by a Monday speech at the

Woodrow Wilson Center, Brennan claimed that the extra-territorial and extra-judicial assassinations by drone attacks were both legal and effective.

“The constitution empowers the president to protect the nation from any imminent threat of attack,” Brennan said in the Monday speech. “It is hard to imagine a tool that can better minimize the risk to civilians than remotely piloted aircraft.”

The claim that these drone strikes are aimed at protecting the US from “imminent threat of attack” is a lie. As US officials acknowledged, Sunday’s attack in Pakistan was directed at elements who were allegedly preparing not to attack the US, but rather to resist the US military occupation of Afghanistan.

In Yemen, they are aimed against armed opponents of the US-backed regime. The White House last month approved a CIA request for permission to stage so-called “signature strikes” in which targets may be selected on the basis of “suspicious activity” with no knowledge of who is being killed.

While extolling the “laser-like” precision of drone strikes, Brennan said that, “Unfortunately, in war, there are casualties, including among the civilian population.” While acknowledging that “innocent civilians have been killed in these strikes,” he claimed that such deaths are “exceedingly rare, but it has happened. When it does, it pains us and we regret it deeply, as we do any time innocents are killed in war.”

He added, “Sometimes you have to take a life to save lives.”

There have been some 3,000 Pakistanis killed in drone attacks, of whom only 170 have been identified as known “militants”.

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