

US air strike on Pakistani military post kills 11 soldiers

By K. Ratnayake
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In a new escalation of US-Pakistan tensions, a US air strike on a Pakistani Frontier Force checkpoint near the Afghan border killed 11 soldiers, including an officer, and wounded 10 people, including three civilians, early Wednesday.

The attack occurred in the Mohmand tribal region in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), which is in southwestern Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan. Pentagon officials said two US F-15E fighter-bombers and a B-1 bomber had dropped a dozen bombs, mostly 500-pound laser-guided munitions, on the location.

The US has mounted a series of missile attacks within Pakistan this year, but this is the first time that such an assault has killed Pakistani troops since Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf signed up for Washington's so-called war on terror and helped to oust the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001.

Pakistani and US spokesmen have given directly conflicting accounts of the incident. A Pakistani military official said US forces bombed the strategic Pakistani checkpoint after his country's troops repulsed 30-40 Afghan government soldiers who had attempted to occupy a strategic location on the Pakistani side of the border in the Soran Dara area.

A security official told Pakistan's *Daily Times* that the Afghan army, backed by US forces, tried to set up a post inside Pakistani territory, yet retreated upon the Frontier Force's request. Anti-US militants then attacked the Afghan troops, who called for US air cover, the official said on condition of anonymity. US forces then bombed the area relentlessly, he said.

Pakistani military spokesman Major General Athar Abbas said US-led forces had provided air support to the Afghan soldiers. "We believe it was a deliberate act of aggression," he insisted. The general rejected Pentagon claims that the operation had been coordinated with Pakistan and was intended to defend Pakistani troops against "anti-Afghan forces".

General Abbas told Al Jazeera: "This is an absolutely baseless allegation or explanation. We have co-ordination, we have intelligence-sharing. If there was some doubt about any post they should have informed us before taking up any strike."

Afghanistan's military has declined to comment on the incident. But the Pentagon arrogantly defended the air strike, saying that it "may have accidentally killed allied fighters". Defence department spokesman Geoff Morrell cast doubt on the Pakistani claims without providing any evidence. "It's too early to know whether the strike killed any Pakistani paramilitary forces," he said,

insisting that the bombing was "a legitimate strike".

A Pakistan military spokesman denounced the assault as a "completely unprovoked and cowardly act", and complained that "the incident has hit at the very basis of cooperation and sacrifice with which Pakistani soldiers are supporting the coalition in the war against terror."

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani condemned the attack in the parliament, saying: "We will take a stand for sovereignty, integrity and self-respect and we will not allow our soil (to be attacked)." The PPP-led coalition government issued a formal protest to Washington, with a Foreign Ministry statement declaring that the "senseless use of air power against a Pakistani border post" is "totally unacceptable". The statement demanded an investigation into the incident and asked that the results be shared with the Pakistan government.

The recently-elected government faces mounting public anger over the escalating US aggression in border areas. A Peshawar parliamentarian told the Associated Press (AP) that outrage among ordinary people was increasing. Local tribesmen rallied near the bombed checkpoint in protest, brandishing rocket launchers and Kalashnikov rifles.

Over the past few months, the US has launched a series of military assaults on border areas inside Pakistan, killing innocent civilians. In March, three bombs, apparently dropped by an American aircraft, killed nine people and wounded nine others in the tribal area of South Waziristan. As recently as May 15, US missile attacks hit Bajaur village in Damadola, killing at least 14 people.

This is the first time, however, that Pakistan has openly denounced a US-led coalition attack on its territory. Despite public anger over earlier attacks, official criticism was muted under the Musharraf regime. Even as late as last month's predator strike in Damadola, Pakistan lodged a protest with the coalition forces, but refrained from hitting out in public.

Pakistan's ambassador to Washington, Hussain Haqqani, later denied that his government viewed the air strike as an intentional hostile act. He told Reuters the incident would not cause Pakistan to reconsider its relationship with Washington, "but rather find ways of improving that partnership".

Mounting US pressure on Pakistan

Although the facts of the incident remain hotly contested, the air strike appears to be a sharp message from Washington to both the

government and the military in Islamabad. The bombing came as the Bush administration and the Pentagon stepped up their expressions of displeasure at the Pakistani government's efforts to strike a peace deal with the Taliban groups that have built up their influence along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

Yesterday, the *Washington Post* reported that Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff warned on June 10 that "the Al-Qaeda threat from Pakistan" represented a "huge challenge for the United States" and that "Pakistan has been lacking in its execution of a strategy to eradicate the safe havens for terrorists and insurgents".

Mullen insisted that it was imperative for Pakistan's new government to "take action to eliminate their (Al Qaeda) sanctuary". The admiral insisted that any deals struck between Pakistani authorities and tribal leaders in the FATA had to "require not only the expulsion of Al-Qaeda but also a halt to the flow of insurgents across the border into Afghanistan".

The *Post* also reported that the US has been pushing for months for Pakistan to accept US military assistance. Admiral Mullen said that, as one of the first steps, the Pentagon expected to send 20 to 30 military trainers to Pakistan.

According to the *Post*, Pakistani ambassador Haqqani admitted that the US administration had warned his government that "if the United States suffers an attack that is traced back to Pakistan, Washington will have to take steps to retaliate". Haqqani added: "We want to make sure that it doesn't come to that".

In an earlier BBC interview, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Washington "fully respect[s]" the Pakistani government's decision to initiate peace talks but said such talks would only benefit the "terrorists".

The peace initiatives of the Islamabad government have nothing to do with providing democratic rights or improving the social conditions of the poverty-stricken people in the tribal areas. Rather, the new government is seeking support from tribal leaders to contain explosive unrest. However, the US fears that these moves will bolster Taliban groups and threaten US operations in Afghanistan.

The attack on the Pakistan border post came just two days after the Rand Corporation, a Washington think tank, issued a report echoing Admiral Mullen's demands. The document, titled "Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan," stated that if Taliban bases in Pakistan were not eliminated, the forces supporting the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai "will face crippling long-term consequences in their effort to stabilise and rebuild Afghanistan".

The report accused former and active Pakistani military intelligence officers of directly aiding Taliban fighters, and alleged that NATO forces had found evidence that Pakistani intelligence was providing information to the Taliban on Afghan and US-led forces. The report added that Pakistani intelligence trained and funded the Taliban and other Islamic groups, and helped them to cross the border into Afghanistan.

The Rand report is indicative of the thinking inside the Bush administration and Pentagon. The Pakistani military reacted angrily to the report, saying it was a "smear campaign to malign the Pakistan armed forces and create differences as well as

misunderstanding among the coalition partners". Pakistan's military establishment fears that such allegations will affect their close connections with the US.

It is quite possible that sections of the Pakistani military intelligence have links to the Taliban. However, in the past Washington funded, equipped and trained Al Qaeda and the Taliban to fight the former Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. These activities were carried out through the Pakistani military intelligence, with the support of Islamabad's military strongman, Zia ul Huq—Musharraf's predecessor.

The US is facing a deepening crisis in Afghanistan. Its puppet regime of Hamid Karzai in Kabul is confronting a surge of resistance, not only from Taliban forces but also ordinary people who oppose the US-led occupation. The Bush administration is desperate because its policy has suffered a debacle in Iraq as well as in Afghanistan.

While ramping up its military attacks inside Afghanistan, where it now has 34,000 troops leading a 60,000-strong international force, the Bush administration wants to retain the services of the Pakistani military and political establishment to serve its vital interests. The US sees tightening its grip over Afghanistan and Pakistan as essential to controlling the oil and gas reserves in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In Pakistan, the US is facing major political problems because its ally, the former military dictator, President Musharraf, is thoroughly discredited and increasingly marginalised. The Bush administration has sought to keep him in power with the support of traditional bourgeois party, the PPP, but these efforts are crumbling, creating intense frictions between Washington and the PPP-led government. Last year's election in Pakistan demonstrated the mass opposition not only to Musharraf's autocratic rule but also the continuing US domination over Pakistani affairs.

Wednesday's air strike sent an unmistakable message that the US will not allow Pakistan to threaten its interests. The latest deaths, however, will only intensify the mass opposition in Pakistan toward Musharraf and the US government.

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