

Pakistan: New drone killings deepen instability

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Since June 12, 50 people have now been killed by US drone strikes in North Waziristan.

A US drone attack in North Waziristan in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) killed 20 people on July 16. It brought the number of people killed by US drones in North Waziristan since June 12 to 50.

The July 16 *Nation* reported, "five drones are still flying over the Datta Khel area and hampering the relief activities underway there. This ... is fomenting a fear of the death toll rising."

The media has quoted US and Pakistani "security sources" as saying those killed were terrorists. However, official Obama administration policy is to classify all "fighting age males" killed in US air strikes as combatants. Its unofficial policy is to also claim all casualties are "fighting age males" unless irrefutable evidence to the contrary reaches the international media.

Before June 12, there had been a six-month cessation of drone attacks against North West Pakistan. Their resumption has come in conjunction with a military operation against North Waziristan by the Pakistani army — Operation Zarb-e-Azb — launched on June 15.

The operation and drone strikes were in response to a June 8 terrorist attack on Karachi's international airport. In the shoot-out that followed the storming of the airport — Pakistan's largest — 36 people were killed including 14 security forces personnel and 10 attackers.

Responsibility for the attack was claimed by both the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has been based in Pakistan since it was driven out of Afghanistan by US-led occupation forces.

Embedded media

Like the US, the Pakistani state reports almost all casualties inflicted by the military as terrorists. Since the operation was launched, the only media allowed into FATA have been embedded with the military.

The Pakistani and international media have relied almost entirely on the military's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) for information.

According to ISPR figures, as of July 16, 494 terrorists, 26 security forces personnel and two civilians had been killed in Operation Zarb-e-Azb — on top of those killed by US drone strikes. ISPR announcements report an impressive list of terrorist commanders killed and captured.

Since the operation began, about 1 million internal refugees have fled FATA for neighbouring Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province and countless others have crossed the border into Afghanistan.

However, according to accounts from the internal refugees and the few journalists who have managed to enter FATA, most of the Pakistani and foreign Islamist militants fled before the operation.

A July 7 AFP report said: “Local intelligence and militant sources told AFP that up to 80 per cent of fighters fled after rumours of an army assault emerged in early May, most over the porous border into Afghanistan.”

Terrorist commanders fled further afield. Islamist leaders “came asking for trimming their beards and hair very short, saying that they were going to the Gulf and wanted to avoid problems at Pakistani airports,” barber Azam Khan told AFP.

“I have trimmed the hair and beards of more than 700 local and Uzbek militants ahead of the security forces’ operation,” he said.

The ISPR reported support from tribal elders. However, the June 28 News said elders had refused to meet Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif when he made a stage-managed visit to North Waziristan.

Tribal elder Sher Mohammad Wazir told News: “Government and military officials wanted us to stay away from the prime minister as they knew we would inform him about the real situation on [the] ground.

“We also wanted [to] inform the prime minister that all local and foreign troublemakers had left North Waziristan before the launch of military operation there. Therefore, we wanted to demand him to direct military authorities not to destroy our houses and markets.”

The apparent advance warning received by the militants reflects the ambiguous relationship between the Islamist groups and the Pakistani state.

In the 1980s, under the military dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq, Pakistan was the base of CIA-backed Islamist armed groups fighting the Soviet forces then occupying Afghanistan. Domestically, “Islamicisation” was the pretext for cracking down on left-wing and liberal opponents of the military and curbing civil and political liberties.

In the 1990s, under civilian governments, Pakistan-sponsored Islamist groups to project influence in Afghanistan and fight Pakistan’s long-term rival, India, in Kashmir.

The 1996 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was supported by Pakistan, including the direct involvement of the Pakistani Air Force.

‘War on terror’

Since 2001, when the US invaded Afghanistan and launched the global “war on terror”, Pakistan has been allied with the US war while maintaining its sponsorship of terrorist groups.

None of this has stopped the Pakistani state making tactical alliances with Islamist terror groups — in Afghanistan and globally — when convenient.

It has also continued to cooperate with US drone strikes against Islamic terrorists, which for many years were launched from bases within Pakistan.

There are other factors complicating terrorism and counter-terrorism in Pakistan. One is the national question.

Pakistan was created with genocidal violence by the British partition of India in 1948 and is an unstable federation of different nations. The largest in population is Punjab and the Punjabi elite dominate Pakistan.

In FATA and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pashtun nationalists have been targeted by both Islamist terrorists and the military's counter-terror operations.

In Baluchistan the rise of sectarian Islamist terror groups has been promoted to draw support away from the Baluchi national movement, which the military has been waging an extremely violent war against for decades.

Another factor is criminality and corruption, and rivalries between different cliques in the military and civilian elite.

Among the terrorist groups there are those who are involved in drug smuggling and kidnapping to finance their ideologically motivated violence and those whose Islamist ideology is little more than a fig-leaf for criminal activity. Both are used by the elite to further their economic interests, legal and illegal.

Furthermore, the use of Islamist ideology by the elite as a pretext for repression has continued since the Zia years, as shown by the rise in spurious blasphemy charges.

At a June 26 seminar in Lahore organised by the left-wing Awami Workers Party (AWP), speakers pointed out that most Islamist terrorists were based in Pakistan's major cities where they were protected by the security establishment and political elite.

Meanwhile, the marginalised Pashtun population of FATA — a buffer zone created during British rule which, as its name suggests, is ruled extra-constitutionally — are made to pay the price.

On July 3, the Protection of Pakistan Act was passed by the National Assembly. Under the pretext of combating terrorism, this law allows for detention for two months without having to appear before a court, and increases police and military powers to use lethal force.

Attacking the left

AWP general secretary Farooq Tariq wrote on social media: "It will ... be used against political opponents, same as the [existing] anti-terrorist laws, [which] many trade union leaders are charged under ... also political activists."

Among those trade union leaders who are imprisoned under existing anti-terror laws are the "Faisalabad Six". They are leaders of the Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM) jailed since July 2010 for leading a strike of 100,000 workers in Faisalabad's Dickensian textile factories.

The workers are demanding a 17% pay rise to bring wages in line with the legal minimum wage.

Extra-legal terrorism is also used against the LQM. On June 20, LQM leader Latif Ansari was badly wounded after being shot five times for organising brick-kiln workers. These are among the most exploited workers in Pakistan, whole families being forced to work in slave labour conditions to pay off generations-old debts.

This debt slavery is technically illegal, but the laws are not enforced and it was for campaigning to force the brick-kiln owners to abide by anti-slavery laws that Ansari was shot.

In some instances, military repression and the military's economic interests are directly linked. Such is the case with the Okara Military Farms in Punjab. During British rule the British Indian Army was given feudal landownership, which was inherited by the Pakistani military at independence.

Since 2000, the Anjman Mozareen Punjab (AMP) has been organising the tenant farmers in their struggle for land rights, a struggle notable for the unity between Muslim and Christian peasants and the high degree of participation by women.

On July 3, the army invaded the villages, killed two peasants, injured 29 and arrested 150 AMP leaders and other peasants.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani and international media continues to report the ISPR's claims of terrorist leaders being killed in North Waziristan. As the actual terrorists fled before Operation Zarb-e-Azb, this raises the question of who is being killed there.

From a displaced persons camp in Bannu, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Zahir Shah, a refugee from North Waziristan, told the Dawn on July 8: "Air strikes have killed many civilians including women and children and hardly any terrorists. Ordinary civilians have also been shot at sight."

Haji Saleem Khan, another refugee in Bannu, told the June 18 News: "Why did they begin this operation so late? Most of the militants have already fled, those left behind are non-combatants.

"They killed women and children in the air strikes, I myself took out dead bodies from under the rubble."

It is impossible to work out the true civilian body count, it is clearly more than the army's claim of two.

Tony Iltis, July 19, 2014

P.S.

* <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/56899>