Afghanistan-US: Report Shows Drones Strikes Based on Scant Evidence

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WASHINGTON, Oct 18, 2010 (IPS) - New information on the Central Intelligence Agency's campaign of drone strikes in northwest Pakistan directly contradicts the image the Barack Obama administration and the CIA have sought to establish in the news media of a programme based on highly accurate targeting that is effective in disrupting al Qaeda's terrorist plots against the United States.

A new report on civilian casualties in the war in Pakistan has revealed direct evidence that a house was targeted for a drone attack merely because it had been visited by a group of Taliban soldiers.

The report came shortly after publication of the results of a survey of opinion within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan showing overwhelming popular opposition to the drone strikes and majority support for suicide attacks on U.S. forces under some circumstances.

Meanwhile, data on targeting of the drone strikes in Pakistan indicate that they have now become primarily an adjunct of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, targeting almost entirely militant groups involved in the Afghan insurgency rather than al Qaeda officials involved in plotting global terrorism.

The new report published by the Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict (CIVIC) last week offers the first glimpse of the drone strikes based on actual interviews with civilian victims of the strikes.

In an interview with a researcher for CIVIC, a civilian victim of a drone strike in North Waziristan carried out during the Obama administration recounted how his home had been visited by Taliban troops asking for lunch. He said he had agreed out of fear of refusing them.

The very next day, he recalled, the house was destroyed by a missile from a drone, killing his only son.

The CIVIC researcher, Christopher Rogers, investigated nine of the 139 drone strikes carried out since the beginning of 2009 and found that a total of 30 civilians had been killed in those strikes, including 14 women and children.

If that average rate of 3.33 civilian casualties for each drone bombing is typical of all the strikes since the rules for the strikes were loosened in early 2008, it would suggest that roughly 460 civilians have been killed in the drone campaign during that period.

The total number of deaths from the drone war in Pakistan since early 2008 is unknown, but has been estimated by Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann of the New America Foundation at between 1,109 and 1,734.

Only 66 leading officials in al Qaeda or other anti-U.S. groups have been killed in the bombings. Reports on the bombings have listed the vast majority of the victims as "militants", without further explanation.

The victim's account of a drone attack based on the flimsiest rationale is consistent with the revelation in New York Times reporter David Sanger's book "The Inheritance" that the CIA was given much greater freedom in early 2008 to hit targets that might well involve killing innocent civilians.

The original rationale of the drone campaign was to "decapitate" al Qaeda by targeting a list of high-ranking al Qaeda officials. The rules of engagement required firm evidence that there were no civilians at the location who would be killed by the strike.

But in January 2008 the CIA persuaded President George W. Bush to approve a set of "permissions" proposed by the CIA that same month which allowed the agency to target locations rather than identified al Qaeda leaders if those locations were linked to a "signature" – a pattern of behaviour on the part of al Qaeda officials that had been observed over time.

That meant the CIA could now bomb a motorcade or a house if it was believed to be linked to al Qaeda, without identifying any particular individual target.

A high-ranking Bush administration national security official told Sanger that Bush later authorised even further widening of the power of the CIA's operations directorate to make life or death decisions based on inferences rather than hard evidence. The official acknowledged that giving the CIA so much latitude was "risky", because "you can make more mistakes - you can hit the wrong house, or misidentify the motorcade."

The extraordinary power ceded to the CIA operations directorate under the programme provoked serious concerns in the intelligence community, according to one former intelligence official. It allowed that directorate to collect the intelligence on potential targets in the FATA, interpret its own intelligence and then make lethal decisions based on that interpretation – all without any outside check on the judgments it was making, even from CIA's own directorate of intelligence.

Officials from other intelligence agencies have sought repeatedly to learn more about how the operations directorate was making targeting decisions but were rebuffed, according to the source.

Some national security officials, including mid-level officials involved in the drone programme itself, have warned in the past that the drone strikes have increased anti-Americanism and boosted recruitment for the Pakistani Taliban and al Qaeda. New support for that conclusion has now come from the results of a survey of opinion on the strikes in FATA published by the New American Foundation and Terror Free Tomorrow.

The survey shows that 76 percent of the 1,000 FATA residents surveyed oppose drone strikes and that nearly half of those surveyed believe they kill mostly civilians.

Sixty percent of those surveyed believed that suicide bombings against the U.S. military are "often or sometimes justified".

Meanwhile, data on the targeting of drone strikes make it clear that the programme, which the Obama administration and the CIA have justified as effective in disrupting al Qaeda terrorism, is now focused on areas where Afghan and Pakistani militants are engaged in the war in Afghanistan.

Most al Qaeda leaders and the Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud, who has been closely allied with al Qaeda against the Pakistani government, have operated in South Waziristan.

North Waziristan is where the Haqqani network provides safe havens to Pashtun insurgents fighting U.S.-NATO troops in Afghanistan. It is also where Hafiz Gul Bahadur, leader of a Pakistani Taliban

faction who has called for supporting the Afghan insurgency rather than jihad against the Pakistani government, operates.

In 2009, just over half the drone strikes were still carried out in South Waziristan. But in 2010, 90 percent of the 86 drone strikes carried out thus far have been in North Waziristan, according to data collected by Bill Roggio and Alexander Mayer and published on the website of the Long War Journal, which supports the drone campaign.

The dramatic shift in targeting came after al Qaeda officials were reported to have fled from South Waziristan to Karachi and other major cities.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration was privately acknowledging that the war would be a failure unless the Pakistani military changed its policy of giving the Haqqani network a safe haven in North Waziristan.

When asked whether the drone campaign was now primarily about the war in Afghanistan rather than al Qaeda terrorism, Peter Bergin of the New America Foundation's Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative told IPS, "I think that's a reasonable conclusion."

Bergin has defended the drone campaign in the past as "the only game in town" in combating terrorism by al Qaeda.

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P.S.

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