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US drones attack Pakistan targets for third successive day

US drone kills up to 17 people in north Waziristan, the third such attack on targets in Pakistan in as many days

Jon Boone in Islamabad
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The frequency of US drone attacks has stepped up considerably since last month's Nato conference in Chicago.
Photograph: US Air Force/Getty Images

Four missiles launched by a US drone has killed up to 17 people in north-west Pakistan, according to security sources, in the latest in a series of remote-controlled attacks which are straining relations between Washington and Islamabad.

The most recent drone operation targeted a hamlet in North Waziristan on Monday, a tribal area regarded as a hub for al-Qaida and Taliban fighters waging insurgencies on both sides of the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border. US and Pakistani government sources said Abu Yahya al-Libi, a senior al-Qaida leader who had survived previous drone attacks, was a target of one of the strikes. It was the third such strike in as many days – similar operations over the weekend claimed a dozen lives – and the eighth in two weeks.

On Sunday, 10 suspected militants were killed by missiles fired from a drone in Mana Raghzai village in South Waziristan. The victims had gathered to pray for a militant commander who had been killed by another drone strike on Saturday.

"There has been a great increase in US strikes," said Muhammad Nawaz, a tribal elder in North Waziristan. "The people feel terrorised because we hear the drones in the sky most of the time. The militants are furious about the missile strikes."

A Pakistani intelligence official said Monday's missile attack flattened a mud house in Hasokhel, a hamlet to the east of Miranshah, North Waziristan's capital.



A map showing

Pakistan's tribal areas, where the drone attacks have been concentrated.

He said: "We have reports that there were some Uzbek militants among the dead, but we cannot be certain in our identification as the bodies were badly charred."

The frequency of US drone attacks is still a long way from its 2010 peak, but it has picked up since the Nato conference in Chicago last month which failed to persuade Pakistan to reopen its borders to Nato traffic. Supply lines into Afghanistan have been severed for six months. The American defence secretary, Leon Panetta, last week described diplomatic conditions between Washington and Islamabad as "up and down", noting "this is one of the most complicated relationships we have had".

Pakistan strongly condemned the drone strikes, which it described as illegal and said they violated its sovereignty. The Pakistan government says the CIA drone campaign fuels anti-US sentiment in the country

Bill Roggio, an analyst who runs the Long War Journal website, said the attacks underlined "just how bad Pakistan and US relations are at the moment. "These last eight strikes all occurred after the Nato summit," he said. "The strikes were halted in an attempt to get the Pakistanis on board to reopen the supply lines but when they didn't happen they turned the programme back on."

Prior to the recent spate of attacks, the Obama administration's drone campaign had appeared suspended after lobbying from diplomats, particularly the US ambassador in Islamabad, who argued that the CIA programme was preventing the two sides from burying their differences.

Pakistan closed its borders to Nato supply vehicles in November after US forces killed 24 Pakistani soldiers in a border incident. Despite signs that Islamabad would relent, including in the runup to last month's Nato conference, Pakistan continues to demand an apology for the killing of its soldiers and an end to drone attacks and a sharp increase in the tariff paid by Nato for moving cargo across Pakistani territory as conditions to reopen them.

The increase in the number of drone attacks comes as the US assistant defence secretary, Peter Lavoy, prepares to visit Islamabad in an effort to persuade Pakistan to end its blockade. One sticking point is reportedly close to being fixed. On Monday Pakistan's Dawn newspaper reported the US had finally agreed to pay Pakistan \$1.8bn (£1.2bn) as recompense for its efforts fighting militancy along its western border areas.

The two sides are running out of time to complete negotiations on the Nato supplies as the US Congress, which goes on a summer recess on 4 July, requires two weeks' notice to approve any new deal.

In the border areas some people agreed that Pakistan was being punished by the US for its intransigence. "Also, the summer fighting season has already started in Afghanistan,"

said Mir Nawaz, a tribesman from Miranshah. "The US wants to keep the militants under pressure."

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