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April 4, 2010

Drones Batter Qaeda and Allies Within Pakistan

By **JANE PERLEZ** and **PIR ZUBAIR SHAH**

PESHAWAR, Pakistan — A stepped-up campaign of American [drone](#) strikes over the past three months has battered [Al Qaeda](#) and its Pakistani and Afghan brethren in the tribal area of North Waziristan, according to a mid-ranking militant and supporters of the government there.

The strikes have cast a pall of fear over an area that was once a free zone for [Al Qaeda](#) and the [Taliban](#), forcing militants to abandon satellite phones and large gatherings in favor of communicating by courier and moving stealthily in small groups, they said.

The drones, operated by the [C.I.A.](#), fly overhead sometimes four at a time, emitting a beelike hum virtually 24 hours a day, observing and tracking targets, then unleashing missiles on their quarry, they said.

The strikes have sharpened tensions between the local tribesmen and the militants, who have dumped bodies with signs accusing the victims of being American spies in Miram Shah, the main town in North Waziristan, they said.

The impact of the drone strikes on the militants' operations — on freedom of movement, ability to communicate and the ease of importing new recruits to replace those who have been killed — has been difficult to divine because North Waziristan, at the nether reaches of the tribal area, is virtually sealed from the outside world.

None of those interviewed would allow their names to be used for fear for their safety, and all were interviewed separately in a city outside the tribal areas. The supporters of the government worked in positions where they had access to information about the effects of the drone campaign.

Along with that of the militant, the accounts provided a rare window on how the drones have transformed life for all in the region.

By all reports, the bombardment of North Waziristan, and to a lesser extent South Waziristan, has become fast and furious since a combined Taliban and Qaeda [suicide attack on a C.I.A. base in Khost](#), in southern Afghanistan, in late December.

In the first six weeks of this year, more than [a dozen strikes killed up to 90 people](#) suspected of being militants, according to Pakistani and American accounts. There are now multiple strikes on some days, and in some weeks the strikes occur every other day, the people from North Waziristan said.

The strikes have become so ferocious, “It seems they really want to kill everyone, not just the leaders,” said the militant, who is a mid-ranking fighter associated with the insurgent network headed by Jalaluddin and [Sirajuddin Haqqani](#). By “everyone” he meant rank-and-file fighters, though civilians are being killed, too.

Tactics used just a year ago to avoid the drones could not be relied on, he said. It is, for instance, no longer feasible to sleep under the trees as a way of avoiding the drones. “We can’t lead a jungle existence for 24 hours every day,” he said.

Militants now sneak into villages two at a time to sleep, he said. Some homeowners were refusing to rent space to Arabs, who are associated with Al Qaeda, for fear of their families’ being killed by the drones, he said.

The militants have abandoned all-terrain vehicles in favor of humdrum public transportation, one of the government supporters said.

The Arabs, who have always preferred to keep at a distance from the locals, have now gone further underground, resorting to hide-outs in tunnels dug into the mountainside in the Datta Khel area adjacent to Miram Shah, he said.

“Definitely Haqqani is under a lot of pressure,” the militant said. “He has lost commanders, a brother and other family members.”

While unpopular among the Pakistani public, the drone strikes have become a weapon of choice for the Obama administration after the Pakistani Army rebuffed pleas to mount a ground offensive in North Waziristan to take on the militants who use the area to strike at American and [NATO](#) forces in Afghanistan.

The Pakistani military says it is already overstretched fighting militants on other fronts. But the militants in North Waziristan — the Haqqani network backed by Al Qaeda — are also longtime allies of [Pakistan’s](#) military and intelligence services. The group may yet prove useful for Pakistan to exert influence in postwar Afghanistan.

The army maintains a division of soldiers in North Waziristan, but, the militant said, the Pakistani soldiers do little to hinder militant operations, which, though under greater pressure from the drones, have by no means stopped.

Training sessions on how to make [improvised explosive devices](#) for use against American and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan continue, the militant said.

At one eight-day “crash course” in March, the militant said he learned how to mix explosive chemicals and how to load a car with explosives that would be used in suicide bombings.

In public, the Pakistani government opposes the drones, citing a violation of sovereignty.

Under American pressure, however, the Pakistani intelligence agency, [Inter-Services Intelligence](#), has provided important intelligence for targets, American and Pakistani officials have said.

But increasingly the Americans appear to have developed their own sources, the militant said.

An influx of young Arabs turned up in North Waziristan recently, presumably to replace some of the older Arabs who had been killed by the drones. But many militants assumed that some of these Arabs were actually American agents, he said.

“Al Qaeda is very careful who they take among the new Arab recruits because they are informants for America,” the militant said.

Perhaps the most disturbing strike for the Haqqanis was the [killing of Sirajuddin Haqqani's younger brother](#), Mohammad, on Feb. 16.

One government supporter in the area said he witnessed the attack. “I was walking when I saw two drones, one going in one direction, one in another direction. I had a feeling they were preparing,” he said.

There were “two blasts” when a car was hit about 1,200 feet in front of him, he said.

“There was total dust, everything was hazy,” he said. Suddenly, Haqqani fighters appeared out of nowhere. “All these vehicles rushed up, cordoned the site so no outsider could come. They took away the dead bodies.”

The question of civilian deaths is an almost daily worry, all four men said. “Civilians are worried because there is hardly a house without a fighter,” the militant said.

Two of the government supporters said they knew of civilians, including friends, who had been

killed by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But, they said, they are prepared to sacrifice the civilians if it means North Waziristan will be rid of the militants, in particular the Arabs.

“On balance, the drones may have killed 100, 200, 500 civilians,” said one of the men. “If you look at the other guys, the Arabs and the kidnappings and the targeted killings, I would go for the drones.”