

Drone Strike Comes Despite Obama's Transparency Pledge

BY KIMBERLY DOZIER
AP Intelligence Writer

WASHINGTON — The drone attack that killed a Pakistan Taliban deputy leader this week was a clear signal that despite President Barack Obama's promise last week of new transparency in the drone program, the CIA will still launch secret attacks on militants in north Pakistan and the administration will not have to tell anyone about it.

The CIA drone took off from Afghanistan on Wednesday and struck a compound in Pakistan's remote tribal areas where the agency believed Waliur Rehman was staying. The Pakistani Taliban later confirmed the death of Rehman, believed to be one of the key planners behind the deadly suicide bombing against a CIA base in 2009.

But White House officials would not even confirm that the strike occurred, much less confirming Rehman's death, although the president pledged in a national security speech last week that he would be more transparent about U.S. counterterrorism actions.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest on Thursday would only say broadly that Obama feels a responsibility to protect U.S. forces in the "Afghan war theater" — it includes Pakistan — and would use a "range of abilities" to provide those forces as much protection as possible.

Obama announced new "presidential policy guidelines" last week on the standards his administration has been using when deciding to launch

lethal strikes, including a guideline to strike a target only if it presents an "imminent threat" to U.S. national security and only if the target cannot be captured. He also stated his preference for using the military, not the CIA, to carry out such strikes.

But he also indicated that the CIA would continue to control and run its secret drone programs in places like Pakistan and Yemen. While the CIA has permission from the Yemeni government to take strikes, it operates without permission from the Pakistani government, and the newly elected administration of Nawaz Sharif has demanded an end to the program that has killed more than 3,000 people since 2004.

The program has also eliminated dozens of key militants, including al-Qaida's second-in-command, Abu Yahya al-Libi, last year.

Obama's speech promising more transparency is not necessarily at odds with this week's covert strike, according to Shamila Chaudhary, a former National Security Council staffer who worked on Pakistan.

"He's codifying it, trying to set down in legal language" the counterterrorism program built during Obama's first term, said Chaudhary, now at the New America Foundation.

"But Pakistan is still an exception," she said. The fact that the American drone took out one of Pakistan's enemies also probably helped mute Islamabad's reaction, she added.

U.S. officials briefed on the drone program say the administration's intent in the speech was to

take the heat off the controversial drone strikes by promising future action would be done by the military when possible. The suggestion was that military strikes are more subject to publicly accessible congressional oversight. In fact, Congress is briefed on drone strikes by both the military and CIA but in closed, classified hearings.

But U.S. officials say they will continue to carry out drone strikes, launched from bases in neighboring Afghanistan or anywhere else al-Qaida and its affiliates operate and local governments can't or won't act. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not authorized to discuss the classified program publicly.

Guidelines for lethal force issued by the White House after the speech would seem to fit the Rehman case, stating that lethal action would only be taken against "a target that poses a continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons," where there is "near certainty that non-combatants will not be injured or killed."

White House spokesman Jay Carney on Wednesday said Rehman was responsible for cross-border attacks in Afghanistan against NATO troops and as well as deadly attacks against Pakistani troops and civilians. Rehman was also thought to be a key player in the 2009 suicide attack on a U.S. base in Afghanistan that killed seven Americans working for the CIA. Pakistani officials said the other three killed in the drone strike also were militants.

Alarm Grows As Iraqi Forces Fail To Stem Violence

BY ADAM SCHRECK
Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Officials in Iraq are growing increasingly concerned over an unabated spike in violence that claimed at least another 33 lives on Thursday and is reviving fears of a return to widespread sectarian fighting.

Authorities announced plans to impose a sweeping ban on many cars across the Iraqi capital starting early Friday in an apparent effort to thwart car bombings, as the United Nations envoy to Iraq warned that "systemic violence is ready to explode."

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, meanwhile, was shown on state television visiting security checkpoints around Baghdad the previous night as part of a three-hour inspection tour, underscoring the government's efforts to show it is acting to curtail the bloodshed.

Iraqi security forces are struggling to contain the country's most relentless round of violence since the 2011 U.S. military withdrawal.

The rise in violence follows months of protests against the Shiite-led government by Iraq's Sunni minority, many of whom feel they've been marginalized and unfairly treated since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. Tensions escalated sharply last month after a deadly crackdown by security forces on a Sunni protest camp.

Sunni militants, including al-Qaida, have long targeted Iraq's Shiite majority and government security forces. But Sunni mosques and other targets have also been struck over the past several weeks, raising the possibility that Shiite militias are also growing more active.

Several members of the security forces were killed in Thursday's bombings. The attacks also included an assassination attempt by a suicide bomber targeting a provincial governor in the country's Sunni-dominated west.

"These daily patterns of car bomb attacks ... in Baghdad and some other cities (are) really unacceptable for the people of Iraq, who have suffered so much," Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said Thursday.

"It's the government's responsibility to redouble its efforts, to revise its security plans, to contain this wave, to prevent it from sliding into sectarian conflict and war," he added. "That should not happen again."

The spike in violence, which has gained momentum since the middle of the month, is raising worries that Iraq is heading back toward the widespread sectarian bloodletting that spiked in 2006 and 2007 and pushed the country to the brink of civil war.

More than 500 people have been killed in May. The month before was Iraq's deadliest since June 2008, according to a United Nations tally that put April's death toll at more than 700.

"Iraq is a reactor that's overheating and there's little coolant available," said Ramzy Mardini, an analyst at the Beirut-based Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies. "Iraq's nascent politics is not quipped to sustain the current dangerous levels of internal and external pressure."

THE STING OF THE BEE



Jonathan Caldwell of Hendersonville, Tennessee, reacts after misspelling a word in the semifinals of the 2013 Scripps National Spelling Bee Thursday in National Harbor, Maryland.

CHUCK MYERS/MCT

Syria's Assad Is 'Confident In Victory' In Civil War

BY ZEINA KARAM AND BASSEM MROUE
Associated Press

BEIRUT — Syrian President Bashar Assad said in an interview broadcast Thursday that he is "confident in victory" in his country's civil war, and he warned that Damascus would retaliate in kind to any future Israeli airstrike on his territory.

Assad also told the Lebanese TV station Al-Manar that Russia has fulfilled some of its weapons contracts recently, but he was vague on whether this included advanced S-300 air defense systems.

The Syrian president's comments were in line with a forceful and confident message the regime has been sending in recent days, even as the international community attempts to launch a peace conference in Geneva, possibly next month. The strong tone coincided with recent military victories in battles with armed rebels trying to topple him.

Assad's interview was broadcast as Syria's main political opposition group appeared to fall into growing disarray.

The international community had hoped the two sides would start talks on a political transition. However, the opposition group, Syrian National Coalition, said earlier Thursday that it would not attend a conference, linking the decision to a regime offensive on the western Syrian town of Qusair and claiming that hundreds of

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BASHAR ASSAD

wounded people were trapped there.

Assad said Thursday that he has been confident from the start of Syria conflict more than two years ago that he would be able to defeat his opponents.

"Regarding my confidence about victory, had we not had this confidence, we wouldn't have been able to fight in this battle for two years, facing an international attack," he said. Assad portrayed the battle to unseat him as a "world war against Syria and the resistance" — a reference to the Lebanese Hezbollah, a close ally.

"We are confident and sure about victory, and I confirm that Syria will stay as it was," he said,

"but even more than before, in supporting resistance fighters in all the Arab world."

Taking a tough line, he also warned that Syria would strike back hard against any future Israeli airstrike.

Earlier this month, Israel had struck near Damascus, targeting suspected shipments of advanced weapons purportedly intended for Hezbollah. Syria did not respond at the time.

Assad said he has informed other countries that Syria would respond next time. "If we are going to retaliate against Israel, this retaliation should be a strategic response," he said.

Russia's S-300 missiles would significantly boost Syria's air defenses and be a game-changer, but Assad was unclear about whether Syria has received a first shipment.

Earlier Thursday, Al-Manar had sent text messages to reporters with what it said was an excerpt from the interview.

The station quoted Assad as saying Syria had received a first shipment of such missiles. The Associated Press called Al-Manar after receiving the text message, and an official at the station said the message had been sent based on Assad's comments.

Tornadoes Touch Down In Okla., Ark.

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — At least two tornadoes touched down in Oklahoma and another hit Arkansas on Thursday as a powerful storm system moved through the middle of the country. At least one injury was reported when a home was hit in rural western Arkansas.

The National Weather Service reported two tornadoes on the ground near Perkins and Ripley in north central Oklahoma and another west of Oden, Ark.

Arkansas Emergency Management spokesman Tommy Jackson said first responders were having trouble reaching the destroyed home because a number of trees were blocking the road. Montgomery County Sheriff's spokeswoman Brandy Wingfield said there was property damage, including downed power lines, in the area.

Perkins Emergency Management Director Travis Majors said there were no injuries or damage there. Ripley, about 10 miles east of Perkins, did not seem to have significant damage. The Payne County emergency management director did not immediately return a phone call seeking comment.

Thursday's tornadoes were much less dangerous than the EF5 storm that struck Moore, Okla., on May 20 and killed 24 along its 17-mile path. The U.S. averages storms of that nature — with winds over 200 mph — only about once per year. The Moore storm was the nation's first EF5 tornado since 2011.

11 People Vanish In Mexico City Kidnapping

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Eleven young people were kidnapped in broad daylight from a rough Mexico City bar, just 20 days after the grandson of civil rights leader Malcolm X was beaten to death at a nightclub in the capital, anguished relatives said Thursday.

The apparent mass abduction was particularly brazen, even by Mexico City standards, happening in daytime just off the Paseo de la Reforma, the city's main boulevard, and about 1 1/2 blocks from the U.S. Embassy.

The bar that houses the after-hours club where the youths disappeared Sunday also is only a few blocks from the city's main police headquarters in the Zona Rosa, a generally calm district of offices, restaurants, bars and dance clubs.

"How could so many people have disappeared, just like that, in broad daylight?" said Josefina Garcia, mother of Said Sanchez Garcia, 19, her only son. "The police say they don't have them, so what, the earth just opened up and swallowed them?"

She said her son wasn't involved in any criminal activity, and worked at a market stall selling beauty products.

Poll: 2 In 5 Would Consider Single Motherhood

As Christy Everson was nearing age 40, she made a decision: She wanted to have a child, even though she was single and it meant doing it all alone. Her daughter, conceived via a sperm donor, is now 2 1/2 years old, and Everson hopes to have a second child.

"Was it worthwhile? Well, I'm thinking of doing it again, aren't I?" she says.

Everson and women like her are part of a shift in American society. An Associated Press-WE tv poll of people under 50 found that more than 2 in 5 unmarried women without children — or 42 percent — would consider having a child on their own without a partner, including more than a third, or 37 percent, who would consider adopting solo.

The poll, which addressed a broad range of issues on America's changing family structures, dovetails with a recent report by the U.S. Census Bureau that single motherhood is on the rise: It found that of 4.1 million women who'd given birth in 2011, 36 percent were unmarried at the time of the survey, an increase from 31 percent in 2005. And among mothers 20-24, the percentage was 62 percent, or six in 10 mothers.

The AP-WE tv poll also found that few Americans think the growing variety of family arrangements is bad for society. However, many have some qualms about single mothers, with some two-thirds — or 64 percent — saying single women having children without a partner is a bad thing for society. More men — 68 percent — felt that way, compared to 59 percent of women.

Mother Says Boston Suspect Now Walking

MAKHACHKALA, Russia (AP) — The remaining suspect in the Boston Marathon bombings has recovered enough to walk and assured his parents in a phone conversation that he and his slain brother were innocent, their mother told The Associated Press on Thursday.

Meanwhile, the father of a Chechen immigrant killed in Florida while being interrogated by the FBI about his ties to the slain brother maintained that the U.S. agents killed his son "execution-style."

Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, 19, walked without a wheelchair to speak to his mother last week for the first and only phone conversation they have had since he has been in custody, Zubeidat Tsarnaeva told the AP.

In a rare glimpse at Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's state of mind, he told her he was getting better and that he had a very good doctor, but was struggling to understand what happened, she said.

"He didn't hold back his emotions either, as if he were screaming to the whole world: What is this? What's happening?," she said.

Scientists Find Mammoth Carcass With Blood

MOSCOW (AP) — A perfectly preserved woolly mammoth carcass with liquid blood has been found on a remote Arctic island, fueling hopes of cloning the Ice Age animal, Russian scientists said Thursday.

The carcass was in such good shape because its lower part was stuck in pure ice, said Semyon Grigoryev, the head of the Mammoth Museum, who led the expedition into the Lyakhovsky Islands off the Siberian coast.

"The blood is very dark, it was found in ice cavities below the belly and when we broke these cavities with a poll pick, the blood came running out," he said in a statement released by the North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk, which sent the team.

Woolly mammoths are thought to have died out around 10,000 years ago, although scientists think small groups of them lived longer in Alaska and on islands off Siberia.

Scientists have deciphered much of the woolly mammoth's genetic code from their hair, and some believe it's possible to clone them if living cells are found.

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