

Reverse Swing

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Imagine the government of a country sending its troops over the border to another country or its planes there to shoot missiles in villages, killing innocent civilians.

Such a country should surely be condemned for violating many international laws and be held responsible for the deaths of people of another country.

The UN Security Council and the Human Rights Council would surely join in the condemnation and be prepared to take action, such as a boycott of trade of the offending country or even military action to stop the culprit.

Unfortunately, there has been no such international action when the country concerned is the United States.

Missile attacks by the US military at targets in villages in Pakistan have recently become a regular activity.

This has now been accompanied by the incursion of US land troops into Pakistan territory.

The aim is presumably to kill terrorists that the US believes are staying or hiding in Pakistan territory on the border with Afghanistan.

However, the raids and missile attacks have killed many civilians, among them women and children.

This is now sparking outrage in Pakistan. But the country seems helpless to prevent the military action of the US.

And the US in turn does not seem to be called to account for its deeds by any international body.

It might be argued that the US is acting to protect Afghanistan from terrorists lodged in Pakistan.

However, Afghans themselves are also victims of the careless way in which the US military actions are planned or carried out.

There have been many cases of innocent Afghan civilians killed and wounded by US missile strikes.

The US actions have sparked increasing anger in both countries, but little open outrage elsewhere, which is surprising. Imagine what the reaction would be if another country other than the US were the perpetrator.

On Sept 3, US special operations forces crossed the border from Afghanistan and raided a Pakistani village, Angor Adda.

According to news reports, they were targeting suspected al-Qaeda operatives, and reportedly killed 20 people, including 16 civilians, women and children.

"This was a complete botch up," said a Pakistani diplomat. "The Americans went wild on receiving what has turned out to be very faulty intelligence."

On Sept 12, the *International Herald Tribune* reported that President George W Bush secretly approved orders for the first time to allow the US special forces to carry out ground assaults inside Pakistan without the prior approval of the Pakistani government.

American officials said they would notify Pakistan when they conducted raids but they would not ask Pakistan for its permission. This probably violates international law.

The US has also increased missile attacks launched from helicopters at Pakistan villages suspected to house terrorists.

On Sept 4, a day after the raid, a US aircraft fired missiles at a house in Pakistan's Waziristani tribal region, killing four suspected militants, according to a Reuters report.

On Sept 8, missiles fired by US drones targeted at a religious school killed at least 16 people in a northern Pakistani village. Among the dead were four women and two children.

Pakistan's security officials said the attacks (which were aimed at senior al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders) appeared to miss their targets in a failure of US intelligence.

As the attack came on the eve of the swearing in of the new Pakistani President, Asif Ali Zardari, a senior western defence official thought this was a message sent to him by the Americans that unless Pakistan deals with militants, "the consequences will increasingly raise the cost in terms of human lives and pain for Pakistan," according to a *Financial Times* article.

On Sept 11, Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Parvez described the US ground operation of Sept 3 as "reckless" and said his forces would "not tolerate such incursions and will defend the country's sovereignty at all costs."

Meanwhile, there has also been outrage in Afghanistan at the toll in civilian lives from attacks by the allied troops.

Particularly controversial has been an American airstrike on Aug 22 that killed more than 90 civilians, most of them women and children.

The US military had insisted that only five to seven civilians and 30 to 35 militants were killed in an operation against the Taliban.

But the villagers themselves claim over 90 were killed, the majority women and children.

This claim had been backed up by the Afghan government, human rights officials and a United Nations investigation as well as videos and images of the dead, according to a report in the *International Herald Tribune*.

This is the most recently publicised of repeated cases of civilian casualties in the past six years.

"People are sick of hearing another case of civilian casualties," said an aide to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who himself condemned the strikes.

The Afghan government is asking for changes to agreements defining US military engagements in the country, including ending US raids on villages.

After the many hundreds of civilian deaths, it is about time the Afghan leaders make such demands, which are too little and maybe too late.

The "international community" (including the relevant UN agencies) should compile lists of incidents in which US and allied forces have raided or bombed villages in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the numbers of dead and injured, and their identities, as well as their legality or otherwise.

Those responsible should be made accountable. Compensation should be paid to the families of the victims.

And such incidents should not be allowed to continue.

It is undeniable that the US is the world's most powerful military country. Especially because of this, it should not act militarily against or in other countries with impunity. □□□

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