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Obama admits Pakistan drone attacks

US president says use of drones is "kept on very tight leash" in rare acknowledgement of controversial missile strikes.

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US President Barack Obama has confirmed that unmanned drones have regularly struck Pakistan's tribal areas in his government's efforts to dismantle what it alleges are al-Qaeda sanctuaries in the region.

Obama's rare public acknowledgement of the US drone programme in Pakistan came on Monday during an hour-long online video chat with users of the Google+ social network.

Obama said the strikes were a "targeted focused effort at people who are on a list of active terrorists".

The president said "a lot" of the strikes had targeted "al-Qaeda suspects who are up in very tough terrain" in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), along the border with Afghanistan, long believed to be a hub of activity for armed groups.

"For us to be able to get them in another way would involve probably a lot more intrusive military action than the ones we're already engaging in."

The controversial drone programme run by the CIA has often been met with protests in Pakistan amid concerns of civilian casualties. The Pakistani government publicly protests the operations,

but is believed to support them.

A spokesman for Pakistan's foreign ministry reiterated the government's public protest in response to Obama's comments.

"Notwithstanding tactical advantages of drone strikes, we are of the firm view that these are unlawful, counterproductive and hence unacceptable," Abdul Basit said.

The New America Foundation, a think tank in Washington, says drone strikes in Pakistan have killed between 1,715 and 2,680 people in the past eight years.

According to the AFP news agency, the number of missiles that struck the tribal region went down from 101 in 2010 to 64 in 2011.

Iraq use limited

Obama, however, played down the use of drones in Iraq, saying the programme was very limited and focused mainly on protecting the US embassy in Baghdad.

"The truth is we're not engaging in a bunch of drone attacks inside Iraq. There's some surveillance to make sure that our embassy compound is protected."

Earlier, the *New York Times* newspaper had reported that the increasing use of drones in Iraq had outraged Iraqi officials.

The paper, citing a senior US official, said the US government was in talks with the Iraqi authorities, seeking authorisation for the drone operations. But it quoted three Iraqi officials saying they were unaware of such efforts.

"I think that there's this perception that we're just sending in a whole bunch of strikes willy nilly," Obama added. "It is important for everybody to understand that this is kept on a very tight leash."