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Al Jazeera

US drone 'kills 23 in training camp strike

8/10/211

A US drone strike has killed at least 23 suspected Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal region along the Afghanistan border, officials said.

Pakistani officials on Wednesday said the unmanned aircraft fired two missiles, destroying a vehicle and a compound 3km east of Miranshah, the headquarters of the Haqqani network and a known hotbed of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters

"The dead included local Taliban as well as some Arabs and Uzbek nationals," a Pakistani official in North Waziristan said on condition of anonymity.

Officials said 14 of the dead were Afghan fighters belonging to the Haqqani group, a Taliban-linked faction fighting the US in Afghanistan. Six were Pakistani fighters supporting the group, which Washington regards as one of its deadliest foes in the region, the officials told the Associated Press.

The group, founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani and now run by his son, Sirajuddin, has been blamed for some of the deadliest anti-US attacks in Afghanistan, including a suicide attack at a US base in the eastern province of Khost in 2009 that killed seven CIA operatives.

Pakistani officials said the missiles struck what was reportedly a Haqqani training camp at 2:15 am, 21:15 GMT Tuesday, close to Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan.

Some Pakistani officials put the death toll at 18 but acknowledged that more bodies were being dug out of the rubble. The officials told the AP a pick-up vehicle parked outside the compound was also destroyed.

"The vehicle was hit minutes after it reached the house. It looks like the drone was chasing it. One missile hit the vehicle and another hit the house. Four militants sitting in the vehicle were also killed," one official was quoted as saying.

Relations strained

Drone strikes are deeply unpopular among many Pakistanis and have strained relations between the US and Pakistan, with relations at their worst since US special forces killed Osama bin Laden, the al-Qaeda leader, in a secret raid in a Pakistani garrison town on May 2.

About two dozen drone strikes have been reported in Pakistan since bin Laden was killed, according to the AFP news agency.

While Pakistan publicly opposes the strikes, it has privately allowed them and co-operated with the US in determining targets. Locals and rights groups say civilians are regularly killed in the drone strikes.

Washington began the missile programme that targets al-Qaeda and the Taliban on the Pakistani side of the border in 2005, but stepped up the pace in 2008 and again when the Obama administration came into office. At peak times, there can be as many as three or four strikes per week.

US officials do not publicly talk about the covert, CIA-run programme, but privately say it is crucial to keeping al-Qaeda under pressure in one of its main international sanctuaries, according to reports by the AP.