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Although Pakistani Taliban militants have killed hundreds of people accused of spying for the United States or Pakistan's intelligence agencies over the past few years in the lawless tribal areas of North and South Waziristan, the incidents of such execution are on rise since the beginning of the year. The killings, some of which were carried out in brutal fashion and videotaped as a warning to would-be-spies, come as many important leaders of al-Qaeda and Pakistani Taliban militant groups have been killed in the escalated drone attacks in the region.

Local tribal elders believe that the recent rise in the incidence of such killings is a warning by the militants to the local population against facilitating the drone campaign in the tribal areas by providing intelligence information. [1] This was confirmed by the Pakistani military's official version of U.S. attacks in the tribal region, which claimed that most of the people killed in drone attacks were hardcore al-Qaeda and Taliban militants and a fairly large number of them were of foreign origin. On March 9, Major General Ghayur Mehmood, who commands troops in North Waziristan, said in a briefing in Miramshah that between 2007 and 2011, 164 drone strikes had been carried out and over 964 terrorists had been killed. Of those casualties, 793 were locals and 171 were foreigners. General Mehmood claimed the latter included Arabs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Chechens, Filipinos and Moroccans, though proof of these assertions was not provided (Dawn [Karachi], March 9).

Because of drone attacks, the militants who once freely roamed markets have now receded to compounds. High-value targets move as many as three times a night, avoid funerals and trackable technology, and rely on motorbikes or their feet to move about. Most drone attacks are based on intelligence from sources on the ground and information from local citizens, said Brigadier (Retd.) Mehmud Shah, a former secretary of security for the tribal area (Central Asia Online, January 28).

The killings of important leaders of al-Qaeda, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Haqqani Network and other militant groups have compelled the militants operating in North and South Waziristan to execute people suspected of spying and leave their bodies on the roadside with

notes pinned to their chests branding them as "U.S. spies" and traitors. [2] The bodies are often mutilated and beheaded. In North Waziristan, corpses appear in fields and roadsides almost daily with a dark warning pinned to their tunic: "All U.S. spies will meet the same fate."

The killings of people accused of spying are mainly carried out by the Ittehad-e-Mujahedeen-e-Khurasan (IMK - Alliance of the Militants of Khurasan), a relatively little-known militant organization. The IMK is a coalition of all the local militant groups and various groups of foreign militants operating in the region. Its main function is intelligence collection and the identification and elimination of spies. The IMK came into existence one year ago at a meeting of all the militant groups in North Waziristan following the deaths of important militant leaders in a series of drone attacks. In order to eliminate the network of local spies providing information on the Taliban to U.S. forces, a 200-member special task force was formed consisting of trusted militants from each group. IMK operatives rely on a strong network of informants in every village and town to find suspected spies. Masked armed men of this secretive organization can select any person belonging to any militant group or clan and kill him if he is proved to be a spy. Except for their top leadership, even the militants do not know the membership or modus operandi of the IMK. [3]

In North Waziristan, Urdu pamphlets issued by the IMK and posted on the walls of the Miramshah Bazaar said no family should help its members if they spy on the Taliban. The pamphlets also stated that there should be no interference if the Taliban kidnap someone on suspicion of spying for the United States and anyone caught doing so could possibly be "killed immediately" (Daily Times [Lahore], May 19, 2010). Militants belonging to the IMK distributed pamphlets ordering people they describe as "dacoits [bandits] under the guise of Taliban" to return the money they have looted from local residents. The pamphlet threatened that those involved would meet the same fate as the decapitated spies if they did not return the stolen goods (Express Tribune [Karachi] June 27, 2010).

The massive escalation in U.S. drone attacks in North and South Waziristan tribal agencies since the beginning of 2011 has also seen an unprecedented rise in assassinations of suspected spies:

- On February 5, four bodies of tribesmen were found in Karak district, pinned with notes accusing them of spying for Indian and Jewish intelligence agencies (The News [Karachi] February 6; Dawn [Karachi], February 6).
- On February 8, militants killed Afghan refugee Bakht Jan for allegedly spying for the United States in North Waziristan. His body was found on the Miramshah- Datta Khel road (Daily Times [Lahore], February 9).
- The bodies of two khasadars (paramilitary personnel) were found in a sack with a warning that anybody else accused of spying on the Taliban would meet the same fate (Central Asia Online, February 10).
- Four bullet-riddled bodies of unidentified persons were found in a deserted place in the Karak district on February 14. Letters recovered from the pockets of the bodies stated that those spying for Israel and India would meet the same fate (The News [Islamabad], February 15).
- On March 1, militants in North Waziristan Agency killed four tribesmen suspected of providing intelligence to U.S. and Pakistani intelligence agencies and dumped their bodies on a Miramshah roadside. Notes pinned on their chests read: "We killed them because they were spying for the U.S. Anyone who acts like this will face the same fate" (Dawn [Karachi], March 1).

- Four bodies of unidentified persons were found on March 21 in a deserted place in the Datta Khel region of North Waziristan. Notes found in their pockets described their alleged roles in the controversial March 17 drone attack in the region that killed 30 people (Dawn [Karachi], March 21).
- Militants are also reported to have killed more than 50 people in North and South Waziristan since the beginning of 2011, though these murders were not reported in the media because of a lack of media access and other factors. [4]

According to local tribal elders, in most cases militants execute so-called spies just to terrorize ordinary tribesmen (Central Asia Online, Jan 28). In some cases, the IMK's militants are also known to put suicide vests on those accused of spying and detonate the vests in front of large crowds to demonstrate the power of the Taliban. An example of this method was found in the public execution of two men accused of being U.S. spies in the Datta Khel area of North Waziristan last year (Reuters, May 21, 2010).

The organized vigilance of the IMK in hunting down suspected spies has left local tribesmen frightened and reluctant to provide vital intelligence to guide the United States. No senior al-Qaeda or TTP leaders have been killed in drone attacks in tribal areas since the beginning of 2011, which shows the growing number of executions has had a negative effect on U.S. intelligence collection in the tribal agencies.

Notes:

1. Author's interview with a local journalist and elders of the Wazir tribe.
2. Author's interview with a TTP associate and elders of the Wazir tribe.
3. Author's interview with a TTP associate.
4. Author's interview with a Bannu-based journalist.