

HOW RIDICULOUS IS PAKISTAN'S NEW CIVILIAN DRONE VICTIM ESTIMATE? TERRORIST OKRA-PICKING GRANDMA!

On October 24, 2012, Nabila Rehman, who was eight years old at the time, was helping her grandmother pick vegetables in the family's garden in North Waziristan. Here is her description of what happened next:

[youtuber
youtube='http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDlvGqQ7
VUo']

Remarkably, Pakistan's government has now indirectly called Nabila's grandmother, Mamana Bibi, a terrorist. That is because the government has released new figures, radically revising downward their estimate of civilians killed in US drone strikes in Pakistan. They must be calling Bibi a terrorist, because the figures claim that there were zero civilian casualties in 2012. Amnesty International provides many more details (pdf) on the strike that killed Bibi and on another strike in 2012 that killed eighteen civilian workers.

Here is Declan Walsh writing in the New York Times on the new figures from Pakistan:

In a surprise move, Pakistan's government on Wednesday sharply revised downward its official estimate of civilian casualties caused by American drone strikes in the tribal belt, highlighting again the contentious nature of statistics about the covert C.I.A. campaign.

The Ministry of Defense released figures to lawmakers saying that 67 civilians

were among 2,227 people killed in 317 drone strikes since 2008. The remainder of those killed were Islamist militants, the ministry said.

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Recently, a United Nations special rapporteur on human rights and counterterrorism, Ben Emmerson, said that the Pakistani government had reported at least 400 civilian deaths since the drone campaign started in 2004.

In an email, Mr. Emmerson noted that the revised figures were “strikingly at odds” with those he had been given earlier by the Pakistani Foreign Ministry and said he would be writing to the government seeking clarification.

“It is essential that the government of Pakistan now clarify the true position,” he said.

BBC gives us the directly comparable figures from The Bureau for Investigative Journalism:

The latest figures released by Pakistan differ dramatically from previous estimates, but no explanation was given for the apparent discrepancy.

London’s Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which researches Pakistan drone strikes, told the BBC it estimated based on reports that between 308 and 789 civilians had died since 1 January 2008 (of between 2,371 and 3,433 total deaths).

Since 2008 then, Pakistan has now revised their civilian death toll estimate down to 67 during a period when TBIJ documents a minimum of 308 civilian deaths and as many as 789. Somehow, Pakistan has reclassified several hundred deaths from civilian to terrorist. And among them is

Mamana Bibi, who is now a terrorist okra-picking grandmother. [That one hits me especially hard; I have fond memories of my grouching about how itchy the okra plants were when I picked okra with my grandfather in his garden.]

Tom Hussain and Jonathan Landay at McClatchy sum up the response to this announcement by Pakistan:

A Pakistani government announcement this week that CIA drone attacks have killed just 67 civilians since 2008 has been greeted with confusion by a public that for years was told that the strikes have indiscriminately claimed hundreds of lives.

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U.S. officials in Washington and experts in both countries were trying Thursday to discern why the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had drastically revised the official civilian death toll. As recently as March, the previous government had told a special United Nations rapporteur that the civilian toll from drone strikes was as high as 600.

And, as would be expected, those who favor drone strikes see this as a welcome development from Pakistan's government:

"It is very, very strange, and it makes you wonder whether they are setting a new policy toward drones, because it certainly flies in the face of everything that the Pakistan government has been saying about drones in the past few years," said Lisa Curtis, an analyst with the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington.

An interesting analysis of the impact of this new estimate appears today in the Express

Tribune, where its conflict with the Amnesty International report is first noted:

Why do these 19 deaths of civilians – non-combatants – caused by drone strikes not feature in the defence ministry figures?

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Therefore, it is imperative to ask: what is the source of these statistics? They are the official figures by Pakistan's Ministry of Defence provided in a written statement to the Senate in response to a query. The source of these figures cannot – or should not – be dubious, unreliable or unverifiable.

If the ministry retracts these statistics, its credibility will be severely under question. So far, the Pakistan Army has not given a statement repudiating these numbers. So, let us assume that these figures are accurate, or close to reality with minor errors.

That is, of course, a huge assumption, but look where it takes us:

The country's policy stance on the US-sponsored drone campaign – apart from arguing that the strikes are against its territorial sovereignty – has been that it is "counterproductive". It has also been condemning the killing of innocent women and children at multiple forums. "The psychological impact of the use of drones on the relatives of civilians killed in an inhumane manner incites sentiment and hatred and radicalises more people. Drone strikes are therefore counterproductive," Pakistan's Ambassador to the UN Masood Khan had told UN special rapporteur Ben Emmerson during the latter's presentation to a UN General committee last week.

So if the drone strikes are killing only a small number of civilians, which means they are accurate, and successfully eliminating the top leadership of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Haqqani Network, then how are they counterproductive?

The defence ministry statistics could, in turn, result in being counterproductive for Pakistan's campaign against drone strikes.

The analysis goes on to state that this new estimate also portrays Pakistan's government as siding with the CIA. Again, that is a huge about-face. The McClatchy article has a bit more on that front:

The new civilian death toll is far lower than publicly perceived in Pakistan, where the news media for years have followed an army narrative that said CIA drone strikes undermined the military's efforts to end the Islamist extremist insurgency by preventing the military from winning the "hearts and minds" of the estimated 10 million residents of the tribal area. The narrative largely neglected to mention that the military had cooperated in many of the strikes.

Sharif, however, has been working to deconstruct the narrative. Within days of his June appointment as prime minister, he acknowledged that the military had coordinated strikes with the CIA and called for an end to the "policy of hypocrisy."

Oh, I see. In order to move away from a "policy of hypocrisy", all Pakistan has to do is to declare an okra-picking grandmother a terrorist. Good luck with that.