

Pakistani Taliban rule out peace talks after U.S. drone killing of its leader

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USPA News - The Pakistani Taliban is no longer willing to start peace talks with the Pakistani government, holding the government responsible for the U.S. killing of its leader, a spokesperson said on Sunday as the group appointed an interim leader until a permanent replacement is found. Shahidullah Shahid, a spokesman for the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is better known as the Pakistani Taliban, told Geo TV that talks with the "U.S. slaves" were no longer possible.

"The [Pakistani] government has given us the present of Hakimullah Mehsud's dead body," Shahid was quoted as saying, referring to the group's leader who died in a U.S. drone strike on Friday. The Pakistani government has strongly condemned the U.S. drone strike that killed Mehsud, summoning U.S. Ambassador Richard Olson to the Foreign Ministry on Saturday to formally convey the government's stance. Mehsud had served as the militant group's leader since August 2009, making him one of the most wanted terrorists in the world. "The latest drone strike will have a negative impact on the Government's initiative to undertake a dialogue with the TTP," the foreign ministry said in a statement on Saturday. "The Government, however, is determined to continue with these efforts to engage with the TTP, to bring an end to the ongoing violence and make them a part of mainstream politics within the parameters of our constitution." But speaking to CBS' "Face the Nation" on Sunday, House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers defended the drone strike, calling Mehsud a "bad guy" whose militants attacked Pakistani soldiers, threatened to carry out operations in the United States, and had ties to other groups such as the Afghan Taliban. "There was some information recently that concerned us about the safety of our troops. I feel a little better for our troops today than I did before this event happened," Rogers said. "We deal with these threats every single day, and they're big, they are real, [and] they affect real people." Also on Sunday, a 42-member advisory council of the Pakistani Taliban appointed Asmatullah Shaheen Bhattani as the group's interim leader until a permanent replacement has been found. The selection came only a day after Mehsud was buried at an unknown location in Pakistan's volatile tribal region. Mehsud was among at least four people killed on Friday when an unmanned U.S. drone fired four missiles at a residential building and a nearby vehicle in the village of Dandey Darpakhel, which is located about 7 kilometers (4 miles) north of Miranshah, the main town in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area. The region is near the border with Afghanistan and is frequently the target of U.S. drone strikes. Mehsud was a spokesman for the militant group under the command of Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in August 2009. Initially known as Zulfiqar Mehsud, he became known by his birth name Hakimullah Mehsud when he was appointed the new leader of the Pakistani Taliban in August 2009. The leader, believed to have been in his 30s, was charged in U.S. federal court in August 2010 for his alleged involvement in an attack against Camp Chapman near the Afghan town of Khost in December 2009. The attack involved a suicide bomber posing as an intelligence asset who walked through the front gates of the base before detonating his explosives, killing 7 CIA employees in the deadliest attack on U.S. intelligence officials since 1983. In September 2010, the U.S. State Department designated the Pakistani Taliban as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and its top two leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists. In addition, the U.S. offered a \$5 million reward for any information leading to Mehsud's arrest. Earlier this year, the militant group's second-in-command, Wali-ur-Rehman, was killed when a U.S. drone fired missiles against a compound and a vehicle also in Dandey Darpakhel. As Rehman would have been Mehsud's successor if he had been alive, it was not immediately known who will now become the group's top leader. U.S. drone strikes have become relatively common during President Barack Obama's tenure in which the unmanned aircraft have targeted suspected militants, their hideouts, and training facilities. However, the number of civilians killed along with militants during such attacks has remained uncertain. The total number of deaths caused by drone strikes in 2012 stood well over 300, according to the Washington-based think tank New America Foundation, and as many as 3,239 individuals have been killed as a result of U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan alone between 2004 and January 2013. In January 2012, President Obama, for the first time during his presidency, publicly acknowledged that U.S. drones regularly strike suspected militants along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. He confirmed that many of these strikes are carried out in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, targeting al-Qaeda and Taliban suspects in tough terrain. Pakistan's government has been public in its stance against the drone strikes, as local residents and officials have blamed them for killing innocent civilians and motivating young men to join the Taliban. Details about the alleged militants are almost never provided, and the U.S. government does not comment publicly on the strikes. However, the U.S. has used drones as an important tool in their fight against terrorism. In June 2012, al-Qaeda deputy leader Abu Yahya al-Libi was killed when a U.S. drone fired two missiles at a compound and a nearby pickup truck in the village of Hesokhel, located in the Mir Ali district just east of Miranshah. It was the most serious blow to al-Qaeda since U.S. Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden during a secret military operation in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad in May 2011.

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