

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: ASA 33/046/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 282
1 November 2006

Pakistan: Over 80 people victims of possible extrajudicial execution in Bajaur

Amnesty International is concerned that at least 82 people in a *madrassa* (religious school) may have been extrajudicially executed in an aerial attack at dawn of 30 October in Bajaur, a designated tribal area near the border with Afghanistan. No attempt appears to have been made to arrest the victims who were described by army spokesman Major-General Shaukat Sultan as some 70 to 80 “militants” who were “training and learning terrorist tactics” in the *madrassa*.

Local people said the victims were clerics and students of the school, many of them under 18. Correspondents said that amongst the dead were children as young as six years old.

Local people have stated that the initial attack was carried out by drones. Villagers have reported hearing loud explosions and observing the destruction of the *madrassa*. This was followed some 20 minutes later by the appearance of two helicopter gunships which also fired rockets into the area. The villagers reportedly said that they had observed drones in the days before the attack flying over the village.

Pakistan Army spokesman Shaukat Sultan denied US involvement in the aerial attack which, he said, had been carried out by Pakistani helicopter gunships targeting the *madrassa* compound which had been under surveillance for some time. A US military spokesman in Afghanistan denied, too, any US involvement in the airstrike.

Amnesty International would like to remind the Pakistani authorities that if these killings were deliberate and took place without first attempting to arrest suspected offenders, without warning, without the suspects offering armed resistance, and in circumstances in which suspects posed no immediate risk to security forces, the killings are considered extrajudicial executions in violation of international human rights law.

Under international human rights law and standards, every human being has the inherent right to life. Arbitrary deprivation of life, including extrajudicial executions, is always unlawful and no circumstances – war or any public emergency – may be invoked as a justification of such executions. All allegations of extrajudicial executions must be immediately and impartially investigated with the view to bringing to justice those responsible for ordering and carrying them out.

Under international human rights standards, security forces may only use firearms when a suspected offender offers armed resistance or otherwise jeopardizes the lives of others and less extreme measures are not sufficient to restrain or apprehend the suspected offender.

It has been reported that journalists seeking access to the area were turned back by the army. This has resulted in an absence of independent reporting from the area affected.

Background

Since 2003, the Pakistani army has been engaged, with some 80,000 troops, in a security operation in the border area with Afghanistan. The operation seeks to remove fighters who have crossed from Afghanistan and to win over their local supporters.

Pakistani government officials have in the past stated that the ongoing operation in the tribal areas of Pakistan is a security operation supported by the army, not a military operation.

In a recent report, *Pakistan: Human rights ignored in the "war on terror"*, Amnesty International expressed its concern about the use of excessive and lethal force in the security operation and called on the government to ensure that all cases of possible extrajudicial execution are promptly and independently investigated and perpetrators brought to justice.