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A Predator Hellfire missile is shown on a simulator's camera at the March Air Reserve Base in Riverside County, Calif., in June.

## In Hunt for Bin Laden, a New Approach

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PESHAWAR, Pakistan -- Frustrated by repeated dead ends in the search for Osama bin Laden, U.S. and Pakistani officials said they are questioning long-held assumptions about their strategy and are shifting tactics to intensify the use of the unmanned but lethal Predator drone spy plane in the mountains of western Pakistan. The number of Hellfire missile attacks by Predators in Pakistan has more than tripled, with 11 strikes reported by Pakistani officials this year, compared with three in 2007. The attacks are part of a renewed effort to cripple al-Qaeda's central command that began early last year and has picked up speed as President Bush's term in office winds down, according to U.S. and Pakistani officials involved in the operations.

There has been no confirmed trace of bin Laden since he narrowly escaped from the CIA and the U.S. military after the battle near Tora Bora, Afghanistan, in December 2001, according to U.S., Pakistani and European officials. They said they are now concentrating on a short list of other al-Qaeda leaders who have been sighted more recently, in hopes that their footprints could lead to bin Laden.

In interviews, the officials attributed their failure to find bin Laden to an overreliance on military force, disruptions posed by the war in Iraq and a pattern of underestimating the enemy. Above all, they said, the search has been handicapped by an inability to develop informants in Pakistan's isolated tribal regions, where bin Laden is believed to be hiding.

With CIA officers and U.S. Special Forces prevented from operating freely in Pakistan, the search for bin Laden and his lieutenants is taking place mostly from the air. The Predators, equipped with multiple cameras that transmit live video via satellite, have launched their Hellfire missiles against four targets in the past month alone. Since January, the reconnaissance drones have killed two senior al-Qaeda leaders with \$5 million bounties on their heads.

Still, debate persists among both U.S. and Pakistani officials over the merits of this aggressive approach, which has resulted in higher civilian casualties and strained diplomatic relations. "Making more effort and flailing are different things," said a senior Pakistani security official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid alienating U.S. authorities.

Bin Laden, a 51-year-old Saudi, has thwarted the U.S. government's attempts to catch him since 1998, when he signed a fatwa calling for attacks on Americans and ordered the bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa. Today, seven years after he masterminded the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, bin Laden is believed to wear disguises routinely and takes extreme care to avoid electronic communications, relying on human couriers to pass messages, officials said. Pakistani officials said the CIA and the U.S. military have played into bin Laden's hands by pursuing al-Qaeda with bombs and missiles. Pashtun tribes along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, angry at the number of civilian casualties, see the United States as the enemy, the officials said. Despite a \$25 million reward posted by the U.S. government, no one has been willing to turn in the al-Qaeda leader.

"Unless you have people who support you, human intelligence will never work," said Ali Muhammad Jan Aurakzai, a retired Pakistani general who oversaw efforts to track bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders after 2001. "You have to have friendly people."

Another major obstacle has been the war in Iraq.

Officials with the CIA and the U.S. military said they began shifting resources out of Afghanistan in early 2002 and still haven't recovered from that mistake.

"Iraq was a fundamental wrong turn. That was the most strategically negative action that was taken," said John O. Brennan, a former deputy executive director of the CIA and a former chief of the National Counterterrorism Center. "The collective effort in the government required to go after an individual like bin Laden -- the Iraq campaign consumed that."

The Bush administration tried to reinvigorate the flagging hunt for bin Laden early last year by redeploying Predator drones, intelligence officers and Special Forces units to Pakistan and Afghanistan. But by then, U.S. counterterrorism officials said, the war in Iraq had already given bin Laden and his core command precious time to regroup and solidify their new base of operations in northwestern Pakistan.

More recently, the search has been hobbled by a tattered relationship between the United States and Pakistan. CIA and U.S. military officials said cooperation is so bad that they now withhold intelligence about the suspected whereabouts of al-Qaeda commanders out of fear that the Pakistanis might tip them off. Leaders in Pakistan respond that they are committed to fighting al-Qaeda. But they also persistently deny that bin Laden is in their country.

Although they lack hard evidence, U.S. officials said it is only logical that bin Laden is in Pakistan, where he has roamed the mountains along the Afghan border for two decades and enjoyed the protection of Taliban leaders.

"In many ways, it's a perfect place," said Bruce Riedel, a former South Asia analyst for the CIA and National Security Council. "But there's not a scintilla of evidence that we have any idea where he is."

U.S. intelligence officials said bin Laden's fear of being caught prevents him from overseeing al-Qaeda's day-to-day operations. But they said there is no doubt he remains in charge of the network.

Bin Laden "remains al-Qaeda's authoritative source for strategic and tactical guidance," Ted Gistaro, the U.S. government's top intelligence analyst for al-Qaeda, said in a speech last month. He added that bin Laden, along with his Egyptian deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, "continue to maintain al-Qaeda's unity and its focus on their strategic vision and operational priorities."

Bin Laden is believed to depend on a small circle of fellow Saudis for his personal security. But officials said the Taliban provides him and his lieutenants with a network of safe houses.

According to an internal Taliban memo viewed by The Washington Post, Taliban security operatives have a code name for bin Laden -- Taqwa, an Arabic term that means fear of or reverence for God.

#### A Hamstrung Hunt

In late 2005, the CIA disbanded Alec Station, its special unit dedicated to tracking bin Laden. The search was going nowhere.

The CIA concluded that bin Laden's importance had diminished compared with other terrorist threats, such as al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq. Analysts who had specialized in tracking the terrorist leader were reassigned.

A year later, however, many intelligence officials were beginning to change their minds. After the disruption of the airliner plot in London in August 2006, it became clear that al-Qaeda's core command -- previously thought to have been knocked out -- had made a comeback. The CIA later dispatched scores of additional officers to Pakistan's ungoverned tribal areas and North-West Frontier Province, where al-Qaeda had taken root.

The environment, however, had become more hostile than ever. Resurgent Taliban fighters had forced the Pakistani government to sign cease-fire agreements in the lawless tribal border areas of North and South Waziristan. Surveys showed that bin Laden's popularity had soared among Pakistanis and that animosity toward the United States was pervasive.

Most CIA case officers were restricted to Pakistani military bases in remote areas. Arthur Keller, a retired CIA officer who served in the tribal areas in 2006, said he had little freedom of movement. Pakistani liaison officers, he said, were more interested in keeping an eye on their CIA counterparts than in providing assistance.

"I couldn't go out myself -- blond-haired, blue-eyed me. I could do it in Austria, but not in Pakistan," Keller said. "It's all done at two removes. That's typical of how it works in a region where the Pakistanis aren't interested in helping out, which they definitely weren't."

Since then, the hunt for bin Laden and his deputies has also been hamstrung by a running dispute among U.S. officials over whether to send Special Forces units into Pakistan, despite an order from the Pakistani government prohibiting such operations.

U.S. officials said they have drafted several covert missions since 2005 that would have dispatched teams of Navy SEALs and the Army's Delta Force into Pakistan after receiving intelligence on individual al-Qaeda leaders, though not bin Laden. But most of the raids were canceled or failed to receive high-level approval because of doubts that they would work and concern over the fallout if U.S. commandos were killed or captured, the officials said.

"There were some really heated debates between the CIA and Special Forces about who should have authority to do what, and under what circumstances," said a senior U.S. counterterrorism official involved in the discussions. "Don't underestimate the friction that was caused by that."

The disagreements appear to have been resolved, at least for now.

Last week, in a covert raid, U.S. commandos crossed from Afghanistan into Pakistan in helicopters and killed about 20 people in a suspected Taliban compound in South Waziristan.

Although it formally protests such actions as a violation of its sovereignty, the Pakistani government has generally looked the other way when the CIA has conducted Predator missions or U.S. troops respond to cross-border attacks by the Taliban. But some officials said ground incursions deep into Pakistani territory could provoke political upheaval.

"This has become incredibly complicated and messy," said a former senior British intelligence official who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "The Americans have been talking about inserting themselves militarily into the tribal areas since 2005, at least. But I think it would just complicate the whole issue by a very significant factor."

Michael Scheuer, a retired CIA officer and former chief of the agency's bin Laden unit, said there weren't many alternatives. "Our options are terrible," he said. "The new president will inherit a fish that is really starting to smell."

### Ignoring Hearts and Minds

Pakistani officials said that if the U.S. government had really wanted to rout al-Qaeda, it should have tried harder to modernize Pakistan's impoverished tribal belt, instead of targeting it with missiles.

"We thought, and we still think so, that the American strategy should have been to stabilize the area rather than look for a needle in a haystack," said Mahmood Shah, a retired civilian security chief for the tribal regions.

"If you find him now, the problem still won't be resolved," he said of bin Laden. "Maybe you'll get the fish, but you'll poison the pond around him."

Since 2002, the United States has given more than \$10.5 billion in aid to Pakistan, not including funds for covert operations. Much of the money, however, has gone to Pakistan's military or has been spent with little oversight, according to U.S. government audits. Only a tiny fraction has gone for building schools and hospitals in western Pakistan.

“The Americans didn’t believe in that,” said the senior Pakistani security official who spoke on the condition of anonymity. “They just said, ‘Bang, bang, bang.’ A man who has a sledgehammer in his hand, all problems look like nails.”

J. Cofer Black, director of the CIA’s counterterrorism center from 1999 to 2002, was a key player in the hunt for al-Qaeda and well known in Washington for his give-no-quarter approach. “When we’re through with them, they will have flies walking across their eyeballs,” he told Bush shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks.

In an interview last month, however, Black echoed concerns expressed by other officials that the U.S. government had paid too little attention to the “hearts and minds” of people living along the Afghan-Pakistani border, many of whom have reinforced their allegiance to the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

“This may sound strange coming from a flies-on-the-eyeballs guy, but the most important thing is support and aid to local leaders and the population,” Black said. “If you don’t have that, you can put in all the divisions you want, and it won’t matter.”

#### A Double Game

For seven years, the hunt for bin Laden hinged on the proposition that the U.S. government had a reliable partner in Pakistan’s president, Pervez Musharraf, who resigned under pressure last month.

But even some Pakistanis said the U.S. government was naive to think that Musharraf or his generals would do much to find bin Laden. They noted that Pakistan’s powerful Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency had cultivated ties with the al-Qaeda leader for two decades and that many officers remained sympathetic to his cause. Afrasiab Khattak, a Pashtun politician based here in the northwestern city of Peshawar, said Pakistani forces would occasionally help the CIA capture second-string al-Qaeda figures, but only to keep the aid money flowing from Washington.

“The Bush administration deceived itself,” he said. “From the very beginning, the Pakistani generals were playing a double game. It was an open secret.”

Khattak said he has warned U.S. officials since 2000 of bin Laden’s close relations with Pakistan’s spymasters, adding that he tried to alert Washington after 2002 that al-Qaeda was rebuilding in the tribal areas.

“We kept telling the Americans, ‘They are here.’ They said: ‘No, no. This cannot be true. General Musharraf is very committed, he’s with us,’ “ recalled Khattak, president of the Awami National Party in North-West Frontier Province.

Musharraf and other Pakistani officials have repeatedly dismissed assertions that bin Laden is in their country, pointing the finger at Afghanistan instead.

Retired Lt. Gen. Dan K. McNeill, former commander of the NATO-led military coalition in Afghanistan, said that whenever he raised the subject of bin Laden with his Pakistani counterparts, the answer was the same.

“They’d say: ‘If he’s around here, he’s on your side of the border. If you think you know where he is, tell us,’ “ said McNeill, who stepped down as commander in June. “That’s always their comeback. My response is: ‘If I knew, I don’t believe I’d tell you. We’d go after him first.’ “

Pakistani generals, in turn, blame U.S. officials for not trusting them. They point out that more than 1,000 Pakistani troops have been killed while fighting insurgents in the tribal regions.

Aurakzai, who was appointed after Sept. 11, 2001, to oversee military operations in northwestern Pakistan and later served for almost two years as governor of North-West Frontier Province, said the United States doesn’t want to accept the possibility that bin Laden could be hiding elsewhere.

“We’ve been imprisoned by this idea that he’s either on the Afghan or Pakistani side of the border,” he said.

“Why aren’t we looking anywhere else? I think we need to change this mind-set.”

So where to start?

“How the hell do I know?” the general replied.

*Special correspondent Imtiaz Ali in Peshawar and staff researcher Robert E. Thomason in Washington contributed to this report.*