

Veterans For Peace Now in Pakistan Opposing Drone War

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Seven Members of Veterans For Peace are part of a 40-member delegation organized by Code Pink now in Pakistan through October 10th.

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WASHINGTON - October 1 - VFP members Leah Bolger, Dave Dittmore, Bill Kelly, Jody Mackey, Rob Mulford, and Ann Wright are meeting with drone victims' families, elected officials, tribal elders, and residents of South Waziristan, where U.S. drone strikes have killed thousands, while injuring and making refugees of many more. Code Pink's Medea Benjamin is an associate member of VFP.

The relentless drone war continued with a U.S. drone strike in the Mir Ali area on Monday, reportedly killing three unidentified people.

At the same time, the Pakistani media is full of accounts of the U.S. delegation and their planned participation in a march to the heaviest hit areas, a story also appearing in British and other world media. The English language Pakistani newspaper Dawn reports :

« ISLAMABAD : Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf Chairman Imran Khan said that a 30-member foreign delegation had reached Islamabad on Sunday which would participate in PTI's 'peace rally' in South Waziristan, DawnNews reported. »The PTI Chairman Imran Khan said that people who do not want peace are against PTI peace rally.

« Addressing a press conference in Islamabad, Khan said Mehsud, Burki and Bhattani tribes of Waziristan have welcomed the peace rally. The tribal leaders had also assured the security of the participants of the rally, he added. »He complained that the government was not issuing visas to the foreign journalists and human right's activists who wanted to attend the rally.

"Speaking on the occasion, US citizen Ann Wright, who is a former diplomat and military woman, said most of the American people were against drone attacks.

""Drone attacks are illegal and criminal. We request the people of Pakistan to raise their voice against them. We will go to Waziristan to apologise to the relatives of those killed by drones,' said Ms Wright, who is also the spokesperson for the Anti-War Movement.

"She said the US had been violating the sovereignty of Pakistan. 'There is travel warning for the US citizens but we have come here and will go to the places where our government does not want us to go,' she said.

Other US citizens who have reached here to take part in the PTI rally include Paki Wieland, a social worker (Massachusetts) ; Linda Wenning, a graduate from the University of Utah ; Lorna Vander Zanden and Pam Bailey (Virginia) ; Jolie Terrazas, Judy Bello, Katie Falkenberg, Daniel Burns and Joe Lombardo (New York) ; Barbara Briggs, Tighe Barry, Sushila Cherian, Dianne Budd and Toby Blome (California) ; Leah Bolger, Tudy Cooper and Michael Gaskill (Oregon) ; Medea Benjamin, Jody Tiller and Alli McCracken (Washington DC) ; Anam Eljabali (Illinois), Patricia Chaffee (Wisconsin), Joan Nicholson (Pennsylvania), Robert Naiman and JoAnne Lingle (Indiana) ; Rob Mulford (Alaska), Lois Mastrangelo (Massachusetts) and Billy Kelly (New Jersey).

« Meanwhile explaining the route of the rally, the PTI Vice Chairman Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that the march will start from Islamabad's Blue Area and will proceed towards Balkasar, Talagang, Mianwali and DI Khan on October 6. »On October 7, the rally will gather at Tank and then head towards South Waziristan where a public meeting will be held at Kot Kai, he added.« Veterans For Peace President Leah Bolger reports that, in addition to Ann Wright, Bill Kelly, Rob Mulford, and herself took part in the press conference representing VFP. Wright was introduced by Khan and spoke about the purpose of the delegation, and answered questions from the press. Bolger recounts : »Ann did a fantastic job of describing the purpose of the delegation and responding to reporters' questions which included asking us if we were concerned for our own safety, given the strong anti-American sentiment in Pakistan. She was very candid in saying that we were opposed to the policies of our own government which we consider to be illegal and immoral, and that as citizens of the United States we apologized for the deaths of Pakistanis because of the drone strikes. She went on to say that the U.S. government does not want us to be here in Pakistan, but that despite official State Department warnings not to travel here, we are determined to meet with the people who have been harmed by our government, and in our name.« Rob Mulford sent in this comment : »Love is the seed from which the flower of peace grows. Prior to coming to Pakistan, I was often asked by friends, family, loved ones the rhetorical question : why, what do you hope to accomplish, what is the efficacy ? Sometimes when put on the spot I struggle for answers grounded in the technical without seeing the ubiquitous truth. I am here to say 'I love you' to a people who have for too long and too often been wrongly vilified. But words are empty without action. The warmth of tacit contact, the handshake, the hug, the reflection of an other's beauty in one's own eyes, and openly sharing one's own vulnerability. This is peace.

« Peace requires courage. Saturday we met with the anthropologist / filmmaker Samar Miniallah Khan. Samar, a Pashtun, tirelessly and courageously works to comfort and protect some of the most venerable people on the face of the earth, women and children who have had no part in the making of a world where they suffer. Her documentary 'Women Behind the Burqa' may just be the most powerful statement that I have ever seen in opposition to war. It needs to be seen by everyone in the United States, shown in schools, to those who govern, and on the popular media. It lays bare the lie that 'we' (US military forces) are involved involved in protecting women. »Drones are robot assassins, murders. They are not tools of the just.« Pam Bailey reports on her blog : »Monday evening, I will fly from New York City to Abu Dhabi, and then on to Islamabad. On Oct. 6, I and about 30 others from the United States and the UK will join PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or 'Movement for Justice') Chairman Imran Khan on a convoy into South Waziristan, the 'no-man's land' along the border with Afghanistan where extremists hide and U.S. drones most often strike.

« Before founding the PTI party in 1996, Khan played international cricket for two decades (at 39, Khan led his teammates to Pakistan's first and only World Cup victory in 1992) and became a much-beloved philanthropist, including the founding of Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital & Research Centre. Foreign Policy magazine described him as 'Pakistan's Ron Paul.' »The original plan was for the convoy to penetrate deep into North Waziristan, the heart of the unrest and military response, allowing us to visit the families caught in the crossfire at 'Ground Zero.'

« However, after threats of suicide attacks were received, the plan was revised to limit the convoy to South Waziristan – a path that the Hakimullah Mahsud-led Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, or the Pakistani Taliban) has pledged to protect. The question now is whether the Pakistani government will allow the convoy to go ahead. In light of Khan's criticism of the Pakistani government's tacit complicity with the U.S. drone attacks, several international journalists already have been denied visas. Stay tuned. »

Veterans For Peace member Ray McGovern, not on the trip, provides context here.

VFP is part of a coalition organizing an online petition in support of banning weaponized drones. VFP members are delivering over 16,000 signatures on the petition to those they meet with in Pakistan : PDF.

In addition, Veterans For Peace is a member organization of UNAC (the United National Antiwar Coalition, a U.S. group), and Leah Bolger represents VFP on the UNAC Administrative Committee. Joe Lombardo and Judi Bello, also part of the delegation to Pakistan, are also UNAC Administrative Committee members. UNAC has just released a statement opposing the use of drones : PDF.

Participants are available for interviews by email and phone, and in-person after the trip.

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Veterans For Peace was founded in 1985 and has approximately 5,000 members in 150 chapters located in every U.S. state and several countries. It is a 501(c)3 non-profit educational organization recognized as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) by the United Nations, and is the only national veterans' organization calling for the abolishment of war.

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* <https://www.commondreams.org/newswire/2012/10/01-9>

* Veterans For Peace is a national organization founded in 1985. It is structured around a national office in Saint Louis, MO and comprised of members across the country organized in chapters or as at-large members. The organization includes men and women veterans of all eras and duty stations including from the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), World War II, the Korean, Vietnam, Gulf and current Iraq wars as well as other conflicts. Our collective experience tells us wars are easy to start and hard to stop and that those hurt are often the innocent. Thus, other means of problem solving are necessary.