

World

## **US drone takes out al-Qa'ida kingpin**

Amanda Hodge, South Asia correspondent

627 words

23 October 2009

The Australian

AUSTRALIA

2 - All-round First

9

English

Copyright 2009 News Ltd. All Rights Reserved

A TOP al-Qa'ida explosives expert has been killed by a suspected missile strike on a house in Pakistan's North Waziristan, striking a major blow to the terrorist organisation and its contribution to the bloody militant insurgency.

Abu Ayyub al-Masri -- an al-Qa'ida commander considered a ``tier-one" US target -- was reportedly killed late on Wednesday during an explosion that destroyed a house in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area.

Masri is understood to have been a member of the military committee of al-Qa'ida, the most important body within the organisation, whose 12 members direct all military strategies. He is the latest in a string of successful strikes on senior al-Qa'ida figures in the hostile and remote FATA region. The attacks are believed to have shattered the organisation's capacity to stage further strikes on the West.

Early reports suggested the house in Spalaga, just 50km from the South Waziristan border, was targeted by a US unmanned aerial vehicle -- or UAV -- although Pakistani security officials later claimed the blast was an accidental detonation of an improvised explosive device during the manufacturing process.

However, analysts cast doubt on the Pakistani claims yesterday, suggesting they were an attempt to cover up US involvement to protect a fragile deal struck with local militant leader Hafiz Gul Bahadir.

Bahadir has reportedly agreed to remain neutral in the military assault against Tehrik-e-Taliban (Pakistan) strongholds in neighbouring South Waziristan in return for an assurance of no army interference in his stronghold.

International intelligence analysts Stratfor said that despite the obvious dangers involved in bomb manufacturing, ``it would be odd for a militant as well-seasoned as al-Masri to make such a lethal mistake himself, or associate with an inexperienced bombmaker".

``Due to the strategic importance of Bahadir's neutrality and the precariousness of the understanding, Islamabad would have a clear interest in spinning the explanation of the explosion to make it look like an accident instead of a UAV strike carried out by an ally of Pakistan," Stratfor said in a briefing.

The US is known to conduct unmanned aerial strikes on the area, which harbours Tehrik-e-Taliban leadership, al-Qa'ida militants and Afghan Taliban forces.

A spokesman for the US embassy declined to comment on the explosion.

US and Pakistani officials were understood to be working to confirm the identity of the three suspected militants killed in the explosion, although gathering forensic evidence from the area would be near

impossible given the security situation.

Some analysts initially suggested the Masri killed in the strike was the same Abu Ayyab al-Masri, also an Egyptian explosives expert, who assumed leadership of al-Qa'ida in Iraq after the death of the late commander Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006.

Singapore-based terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna dismissed those claims. But he said the Masri killed in Pakistan this week represented a big win for the US in its campaign to pick off terror targets. ``It's a very significant military achievement because 90 per cent of all Taliban and al-Qa'ida attacks use IEDs," Mr Gunaratna told The Australian yesterday.

Meanwhile, militants continued their attacks on the Pakistani capital yesterday, with two gunmen killing a high-ranking military official and his driver in a brazen daylight ambush.

``Two people on a motorbike opened fire. They fired on a military vehicle; they killed a brigadier and a driver of the vehicle," a senior army official said yesterday.

It was the second strike on Islamabad within 48 hours, after suicide bombers killed six people in an attack on Islamabad University on Tuesday.