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AFP

Pakistanis shout 'death to America' over bin Laden

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Pakistanis took to the streets on Friday, cheering Osama bin Laden and shouting "death to America" to condemn a unilateral US raid on their soil that killed the Al-Qaeda chief.

While hundreds of activists turned out, there was no major public outpouring in a country where more people have died in bomb attacks than those killed on September 11, 2001 and ordinary people struggle with inflation and power cuts.

In Abbottabad, the town where bin Laden was found and killed by US commandos in a shock operation on May 2, police marshalled a rally of about 1,000 men who gathered at the downtown bazaar to march after Friday prayers.

Setting fire to tyres and blocking a main road, the protesters yelled: "Down, down USA!" and "Terrorist, terrorist, USA terrorist".

A regional leader in Pakistan's main religious party Jamaat-e-Islami mocked Pakistan's powerful army chief of staff, General Ashfaq Kayani.

"You did not fulfil your duty. When they attacked, you were sleeping. Don't be afraid of America, come out of your air-conditioned room," Mohammad Ibrahim Khan told the crowd, waving banners that condemned the raid.

Both the Pakistani and US governments have said Sunday night's operation was carried out with Islamabad in the dark.

Pakistan's weak civilian government is widely unpopular among the country's population of 170 million, and seen by them as a lackey to the United States.

Widespread anti-Americanism is fuelled by the 10-year war in neighbouring Afghanistan and a CIA drone war targeting Al-Qaeda and Taliban commanders who live in Pakistan's tribal belt in the northwest.

A US drone attack on Friday targeted a vehicle and a compound in North Waziristan, the region where US officials had said in the past they believed bin Laden was holed up, killing eight militants, including Al-Qaeda members.

"People become terrorists when they see their loved ones killed in drone attacks," Fazalur Rehman, a labourer, told AFP in the capital Islamabad.

"Pakistanis simply hate Americans."

Hundreds of people also gathered in the southwestern city of Quetta at the behest of the pro-Taliban Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) political party, where the crowd shouted "Long Live Osama", called for holy war and burnt a US flag.

"Osama's services for Muslims will be remembered forever," said Abdul Qadir Looni, a senior JUI figure addressing the rally.

"He challenged the greatest Satan and usurper like America and awakened Muslims across the globe," Looni said.

Hafiz Fazal Bareach, a former federal senator and senior party leader, said the US killing of bin Laden would create thousands of others like him and vowed that "jihad (holy war) will continue against America and its allies."

Pakistan's largest religious political party Jamaat-e-Islami had called for protests across the country on Friday to denounce the US operation, but gatherings were not as large as some people had expected.

Citizens face inflation, unemployment, power cuts and struggle with poverty. Furthermore, they are jaded by violence in their country, where Taliban and Al-Qaeda-linked bombings have killed more than 4,240 people since 2007.

While religious groups could have mobilised large crowds, many follow the Sufi branch of Islam, whose shrines have been frequent targets of hardliners and therefore unsympathetic to bin Laden.

A 300-strong rally was held in the central city of Multan, while in the northwestern city of Peshawar some 400 people shouted "Death to America", "Death to Pakistani rulers" and "Long Live Osama".

Smaller-scale rallies took place in other Asian Muslim countries, where Fridays are traditional days of protest after the main weekly prayers.

In Indonesia's Central Java province, about 100 Muslims took an oath to declare themselves ready to die as martyrs to avenge bin Laden's killing.

About 70 Muslims in the Philippine capital Manila tried to march to the US embassy, following a rallying cry from cleric Sheikh Jamil Yahya condemning the US authorities as terrorists, but they were blocked by riot police.

But in Malaysia, just five people turned up at the US embassy to submit a protest note -- well short of the dozens that were billed to attend.