Obama sharply increases secret military operations

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The Obama administration has sharply increased the use of US Special Operations forces in secret military interventions around the world, according to a report Thursday by the *Washington Post*.

The *Post* reports that the administration has increased to 75 the number of countries where these elements, including US Army Delta Force and Green Beret troops, Navy Seals and other secretive units, are operating, compared to 60 at the beginning of 2009.

Funding for these operations has risen accordingly. The Obama White House has requested a 5.7 percent increase in appropriations for Special Operations in fiscal 2011, amounting to a total budget of $6.3 billion. It has also sought another $3.5 billion in contingency funding for Special Ops in 2010.

Citing senior US military and administration officials, the *Post* presents a telling picture of the Janus-like character of the Obama administration's foreign and military policy: "Beneath its commitment to soft-spoken diplomacy, and beyond the combat zones of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Obama administration has significantly expanded a largely secret US war against al-Qaeda and other radical groups," the newspaper states.

The article continues, "The surge in Special Operations deployments, along with intensified CIA drone attacks in western Pakistan, is the other side of the national security doctrine of global engagement and domestic values President Obama released last week."

In other words, while mouthing phrases about diplomacy, universal values and the rule of law, Obama has presided over a dramatic escalation in the use of killing squads that have been responsible for assassination programs, torture and the murder of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. The use of these methods has been extended secretly to numerous other countries.

The *Post* noted that, "In addition to units that have spent years in the Philippines and Colombia, teams are operating in Yemen and elsewhere in the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia."

"One advantage of using 'secret' forces for such missions," according to the *Post*, "is that they rarely discuss their operations in public. For a Democratic president such as Obama, who is criticized from either side of the political spectrum for too much or too little aggression, the unacknowledged CIA drone attacks in Pakistan, along with unilateral US raids in Somalia and joint operations in Yemen, provide politically useful tools."

What is "politically useful" about these secret killing campaigns? Clearly they are not being kept secret from the populations where people are dying as a result. Those living where US Special Operations forces are operating know that these American units, referred to within the military as "manhunters," are responsible for death and mayhem in their countries. In most cases, governments of these countries also are aware of their presence.

Those being kept in the dark through this secrecy are the American people, the majority of whom voted for Obama in 2008 based on the misapprehension that he was opposed to the policies of international military aggression and criminality that pervaded the Bush administration.

The kind of operations in which these forces are engaged has repeatedly been exposed in Afghanistan in incidents involving the massacre of civilians. In one case last February, Special Operations troops conducted a night raid in the village of Khataba in eastern Afghanistan, killing an entire family, including two pregnant women and a teenage girl. Afterwards, according to Afghan investigators, the troops dug the bullets out of the bodies in an attempt to cover up their responsibility.

The US military has been forced this week to acknowledge that Special Forces troops called in air strikes against three minibuses in Afghanistan's southern Uruzgan Province, slaughtering at least 23 men, women and children earlier this year.

Atrocities of a similar character are undoubtedly being carried out in Yemen, where an official told the *Post* that US forces are engaged in training and joint operations with Yemeni forces as well as conducting "unilateral strikes."

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And US forces are involved in a growing level of bloodshed in Somalia, where Special Operations units are arming and "advising" forces in a campaign against Al-Shabab and other Islamist militias that control much of the country. On Thursday, these US-backed forces shelled neighborhoods in Mogadishu, the capital of the impoverished country, killing at least 17 civilians and wounding scores more.

Either country could easily become the arena for a far wider US military intervention.

The *Post* article suggests a close affinity between the Obama White House and the Special Operations command, which, even in the US military, is viewed as somewhat of a breed apart because of its culture of assassination and terror.

"Special Operations commanders have also become a far more regular presence at the White House than they were under George W. Bush's administration, when most briefings on potential future operations were run through the Pentagon chain of command and were conducted by the defense secretary or the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," the *Post* reports.

"We have a lot more access," one of these commanders told the newspaper. Describing relations with the Obama White House, he added, "They are talking publicly much less but they are acting more. They are willing to get aggressive much more quickly."

Another military commander told the *Post* that Obama has allowed these forces to do "things that the previous administration did not."

According to the report, there are 13,000 US Special Operations forces currently deployed overseas, 9,000 of them in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The *Post* article follows the release Wednesday of a report by the United Nations' special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, which condemns the US as the world's number one practitioner of targeted killings, i.e., assassinations.

The report reserves special condemnation for the CIA's drone attacks in Pakistan, which have claimed hundreds if not thousands of lives, the majority of them civilians. The program, the rapporteur, Philip Alston, writes, is part of a "strongly asserted but ill-defined license to kill without accountability."

He notes that, while the last three years of the Bush administration saw 45 drone attacks on Pakistan, since Obama took office a year-and-a-half ago there have been 53 strikes, 39 of them this year alone.

"Because this program remains shrouded in official secrecy, the international community does not know when and where the CIA is authorized to kill, the criteria for individuals who may be killed, how it ensures killings are legal, and what follow-up there is when civilians are illegally killed," he writes.

The report further calls attention to the sinister character of the drone warfare, conducted from the safety of computer stations in the US. "Because operators are based thousands of miles from the battlefield…there is a risk of developing a 'PlayStation' mentality to killing," it states. "A lack of disclosure gives states a virtual and impermissible license to kill."

It further warns that the unsanctioned character of these strikes leaves CIA operatives participating in it liable to prosecution "under the domestic law of any country in which they conduct targeted drone killings."

Alston accuses Washington of inventing a "law of 9/11" to justify its overriding of international law governing military conflict and human rights.

Indeed, as the *Washington Post* noted in its article Thursday, this is the sole basis invoked by the Obama administration to justify its ever wider use of military force—the authorization for the use of military force passed by Congress in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington nearly nine years ago. That resolution gave the White House authority to use military force against any nation, organization or individual who "planned, authorized, committed or aided" the 9/11 attacks.

The newspaper quoted John B. Bellinger, III, a senior legal adviser in the Bush administration, who helped craft the notion that as president and commander in chief Bush had constitutional authority to wage war at will, a position formally eschewed by the Obama White House.

"While they seem to be expanding their operations both in terms of extraterritoriality and aggressiveness, they are contracting the legal authority upon which those expanding actions are based," Bellinger warned in relation to the new administration.

The forces being hunted by Special Operations troops in Somalia and Yemen clearly had nothing to do with September 11. This only underscores the illegality of the Obama administration's foreign military operations, which increasingly resemble those of a state incarnation of Murder Incorporated.

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