

US drone strikes kill civilians in Yemen

Bill Van Auken**17 May 2012**

Missile strikes by US drones claimed the lives of at least a dozen civilians in Yemen's southern Abyan province Tuesday, as Washington escalated its military intervention in the impoverished Arab country.

The attack took place in the town of Ja'ar, which together with the provincial capital of Zinjibar and several other towns was seized by Islamist insurgents during the protracted popular uprising against the US-backed regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was forced to relinquish his post last February.

Saleh's former vice president and successor, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, has aligned himself even more closely with Washington, taking his orders from the US embassy and American special operations "advisers" who have been sent back into the country after being withdrawn during the recent popular upheavals.

According to Yemeni officials, Tuesday's drone strikes followed a familiar pattern used to lethal effect in the CIA campaign in Pakistan. A first missile was fired against alleged insurgents meeting inside a house. The explosion drew a crowd to the scene as people sought to aid victims trapped in the rubble. These civilians then became the target for a second missile, which killed at least 12 people. Another 21 civilians were wounded in the second attack.

These latest casualties are part of a growing death toll as the Yemeni military, backed by US warplanes and directed by American special forces troops, wages a bloody campaign to retake the areas that came under the control of the Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law) militia.

The US and Yemeni governments have claimed that the militia is merely another name for Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), while other Yemeni analysts insist that it includes both Al Qaeda elements and local groups and tribal factions. By branding all armed opposition as Al Qaeda, Washington is providing the justification for an open-ended war in

Yemen against multiple opponents of the regime, including Shia rebels in the north of the country and those in the south seeking separation or autonomy from the central government.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva issued a statement Wednesday declaring: "Over the past few days, an escalation in fighting has resulted in scores of civilian casualties in Ja'ar." Eric Marclay, the ICRC representative in Yemen, expressed particular concern about reports of "air strikes in civilian locations" and appealed to all sides to "protect civilians and allow health care workers to do their job safely." The Red Cross said that it had distributed food and other items to some 100,000 internally displaced persons in Abyan province.

Both the US military's Joint Special Operations Command and the CIA are waging drone missile campaigns in Yemen, where the number of strikes over the past month has exceeded all previous attacks in the country carried out over the past nine years.

The Obama administration last month granted approval for the launching in Yemen of so-called "signature strikes," in which targets are chosen based on the supposed detection of "patterns of suspicious behavior" rather than the positive identification of alleged Al Qaeda members.

The London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which tracks data on Washington's formally covert bombing campaigns in Pakistan and Yemen, reports that at least 747 people have been killed in strikes on Yemen since 2001. Out of these, 105 are known to have been civilians, and 24 of them children.

The Obama administration seized upon the popular upheavals in Yemen as the opportunity to step up the drone missile attacks, which have been further escalated in conjunction with the present US-directed offensive, which has included some 20 strikes in the last month. Yemen's newly installed President Hadi

has given his full support to the campaign, meeting last Sunday in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa with White House counterterrorism adviser John Brennan, who recently defended drone warfare as both legal and “ethical.” According to Reuters, however, other Yemeni officials have expressed concern that the US missile attacks will provoke popular anger, fueling the revolts in the south and elsewhere in the country.

Yemenis still remember with outrage the bloody December 2009 US cruise missile attack on the village of al-Majala in Abyan province, which killed at least 44 civilians, including 22 children and 12 women, five of them pregnant.

In addition to drone attacks, US fighter-bomber jets are also striking targets in Yemen. According to the Council on Foreign Affairs’ Micah Zenki, “there have been between ten and fifty other US attacks on militants in Yemen using manned aircraft or naval platforms.”

The Associated Press reported that the latest offensive is being directed by some 60 US special operations troops operating out of the al-Annad air base, located about 45 miles from the area of combat. The troops are “coordinating assaults and airstrikes and providing information to Yemeni forces,” according to the AP. It quoted a Yemeni official as saying that they “brought their mobile houses and buildings for a long stay.”

At a Pentagon press conference on Tuesday, Defense Department spokesman Capt. John Kirby described the activities of US troops in Yemen as “counterterrorism operations,” while repeatedly refusing to provide any details. He allowed that American forces “do conduct operations with the Yemenis to get after terrorist targets.”

Meanwhile, the Obama administration Wednesday issued an executive order empowering the Treasury Department to target the US-based assets of anyone deemed by the White House to be threatening “the peace, security and stability” of Yemen.

Targeted by the measures are not the insurgents being hunted down by the CIA and the US military, but rather relatives of the former US-backed dictator, Saleh, who are refusing to relinquish their grip over key levers of power in the country. These include Brigadier Gen. Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former president’s son, who headed the Republican Guard, and Brigadier Gen. Yahya Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, the former

president’s nephew, who commands Yemen’s Central Security Forces. Another nephew, Tareq Saleh, has failed to cede command of the presidential guard, and the president’s half-brother, Gen. Mohammed Saleh Al-Ahmar, staged a strike by the country’s air force after Hadi decreed that he give up its command to become an assistant to the minister of defense.

The unstable and faction-ridden regime backed by Washington sits on top of what is the Arab world’s poorest country, 55 percent of whose population subsist on less than \$2 a day and where the unemployment rate has risen to 53 percent. According to a recent UN report, nearly one million Yemeni children suffer from “acute malnutrition,” and roughly a quarter million of them “are at risk of dying” unless they receive immediate aid.

The chief UN representative in Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, told the AFP news agency that “there is very little [international] interest in this” He added, “Everybody speaks only about the politics, about the security issue, but that’s only half the story... this is a disaster.”



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