

The terror of US drone warfare

Ernst Wolff

28 September 2012

A new study, “Living Under Drones: Death, Injury and Trauma to Civilians From US Drone Practices in Pakistan,” describes the terrorizing of Pakistan’s civilian population by US drone assaults.

The study, released by researchers at New York University School of Law and Stanford University Law School, includes interviews with survivors of drone attacks and relatives of victims, giving a searing account of the horror and suffering that US imperialism has inflicted on an entire population.

Armed US drones first began operating over Afghanistan in October 2001, followed by attacks in Yemen and Pakistan, where most killings have occurred so far. From 2002 until today, the US has extended its arsenal from 167 to 7,000 unmanned aerial vehicles that are remotely controlled from facilities in the US, including the US Air Force Base in Creech, Nevada and CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

The Obama administration has increased the number of attacks from between 45 and 52 under G.W. Bush to 293. It has also changed the strategy for picking the drones’ victims from “personality strikes” – aimed at high-ranking members of alleged terrorist organizations – to a strategy of “signature strikes.”

According to US authorities, these strikes are based on a “pattern of life” analysis and target “groups of men who bear certain signatures or defining characteristics associated with terrorist activity but whose identities aren’t known.” In one such “signature strike,” three men were killed, because one of them had gray hair and was as tall as Bin Laden.

The US government maintains that these strikes are of a “surgical” nature. Testimony of witnesses in several strikes that Washington claimed killed only “militants” disproves this allegation.

One strike dealt with in the report took place on March 17, 2011, targeting a large gathering near a bus depot in the town of Datta Khel, North Waziristan. The

US government claimed that all those killed were “insurgents.” It was subsequently established that the missiles had torn into a group of community leaders and local elders holding a *jirga*, the principal decision-making institution in the tribal areas.

The report states that, “in all, the missiles killed a total of at least 42 people. One of the survivors...Mohammad Nazir Khan, told us that many of the dead appeared to have been killed by flying pieces of shattered rocks. Another witness, Idris Farid, recalled that ‘everything was devastated. There were pieces—body pieces—lying around. There was lots of flesh and blood.’”

The study also spells out how such targets are chosen. It quotes the *New York Times*, which reported that if the CIA “did not have a ‘near certainty’ that a strike would result in zero civilian deaths, Mr. Obama wanted to decide personally whether to go ahead.” In other words, the Nobel Peace Laureate knowingly orders the murder of innocent civilians.

The study states that “the US practice of striking one area multiple times and evidence that it has killed rescuers makes both community members and humanitarian workers afraid or unwilling to assist injured victims.” According to the Geneva Convention, this is considered a crime against humanity.

Interviews with victims graphically illustrate the daily horrors to which Pakistan’s tribal population is being subjected by its constant exposure to drones.

Among the effects are the breakdown of public education, the curtailment of social gatherings and a decline in economic activity; such is the fear that any gathering of people can prompt a missile from hovering drones. This constant fear leaves countless thousands of indirect victims of the strikes who are severely traumatized.

One father, after seeing the bodies of three dead children in the rubble of a strike, decided to pull his

own children out of school. “I stopped [them] from getting an education,” he told the researchers. “I told them we will be finished one day, the same as other people who were going [to school] and were killed in the drone attacks.” He stated that this is not uncommon: “I know a lot of people, girls and boys, whose families have stopped them from getting [an] education because of drone attacks.”

Another father stated that when his children go to school “they fear that they will all be killed, because they are congregating.”

Dawood, a young miner, recalled the day on which his life was changed forever. “I was going to [a] chromite mine for work. On the way, as the car was going there, a drone targeted the car...All I remember is a blast, and that I saw a bit of fire in the car before I lost consciousness. The people in the back completely burned up, and the car caught fire.” Dawood was taken to several locations for treatment before he awoke in Peshawar and realized that “[the] driver and I lost our legs...”

Firoz Ali Khan, a shopkeeper whose father-in-law’s home was struck, graphically described the powerful impact of the missiles: “They destroy human beings...There is nobody left and small pieces are left behind. Pieces. Whatever is left is just little pieces of bodies and cloth.” A doctor who has treated drone victims described how “[s]kin is burned so that you can’t tell cattle from human.”

Contradicting the assertion that drone attacks deter potential “terrorists,” the report cites evidence suggesting that “US strikes have facilitated recruitment to violent non-state armed groups and motivated further violent attacks.” The study also reveals how the American public is systematically deceived about the number of innocent victims of drone assaults by Obama, who has adopted a strategy of counting “all adult males killed by strikes as ‘militants’, absent exonerating evidence.”

This human nightmare is not a by-product of the use of drones, but its aim. US imperialism is well aware of the hostility among the population towards its goals and therefore tries to assert its power and subdue any kind of resistance by spreading terror and keeping people in a constant state of fear.

The impact of this policy was summed up by Khalid

Raheem, an elder member of his community: “We did not know that America existed...[W]e didn’t know how they treated a common man,” he said. “Now we know how they treat a common man, what they’re doing to us...Now we are always awaiting a drone attack and we know it’s certain and it’s eventual and...we’re just waiting to hear whose house it will strike, our relatives’, our neighbors’, or us. We do not know. We’re just always in fear.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact