

UN says US drone war in Pakistan violates international law

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UN officials admitted on Thursday that strikes launched by unmanned US drone aircraft in Pakistan over the objections of the country's government violate international law. This was announced in a statement by UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights Ben Emmerson from Pakistan's capital, Islamabad.

Citing investigations and discussions with Pakistani officials, Emmerson wrote: "As a matter of international law, the US drone campaign is therefore being conducted without the consent of the elected representatives of the people, or the legitimate government of the state. It involves the use of force on the territory of another state without its consent, and is therefore a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty."

Washington has launched hundreds of drone strikes in Pakistan, claiming they were precision strikes on leaders of the resistance to NATO's occupation of neighboring Afghanistan. In fact, what has unfolded is an illegal campaign of mass killings waged against defenseless civilians.

Based on discussions with tribal leaders, Emmerson concluded, "Drone strikes routinely inflicted civilian casualties ... groups of adult males carrying out ordinary daily tasks were frequently the victims of such strikes."

Emmerson found that at least 330 drone strikes took place in Pakistan, killing at least 2,200. Many of these victims have little or nothing to do with Washington's stated rationale for drone killings. According to US government figures, only two percent of those killed by drone strikes in Pakistan are "high-value" targets. According to data from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, at least 474 of the victims were confirmed as civilians.

Such figures doubtless vastly underestimate the remote-controlled carnage Washington is unleashing

along Pakistan's mountainous border with Afghanistan, one of the poorest and most remote parts of the world. As Emmerson acknowledged, "Efforts to identify the exact number of the deceased (and therefore to establish the exact number of civilian deaths) were hampered by security concerns and by topographical and institutional obstacles ... as well as by the cultural tradition of Pashtun tribes to bury their dead as soon as possible."

US officials dismissed the UN statement, with State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland flatly refusing to comment: "We've seen his press release. I'm obviously not going to speak about classified information here."

White House spokesman Josh Earnest declined to comment on the UN statement, but noted Washington's "cooperative security relationship" with the Pakistani army.

The UN statement confirms that the global US network of drone bases and flights—in which Washington orders strikes at will in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and perhaps soon in other parts of Africa as NATO intervenes in Mali and Niger—rests on no legal foundation. A giant apparatus of state murder, criminal in both legal and political terms, is metastasizing throughout the world.

The US government currently operates 8,000 drones worldwide, including some used inside the United States for immigration and other law enforcement purposes. The Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International (AUVSI), the drone industry trade group, reportedly aims to turn drone construction into an \$82 billion business by 2025.

The dire implications of the spread of armed drones were further underscored by statements of US Attorney General Eric Holder. On March 4, Holder wrote a letter

in response to a question as to whether the US president “has the power to authorize lethal force, such as a drone strike, against a US citizen on US soil, and without trial.” He concluded that there were circumstances in which this would indeed be “necessary and appropriate.”

Such moves aim to abrogate basic constitutional rights and establish a pseudo-legal framework for military rule in the United States itself, amid deep popular opposition to the ruling elite’s agenda of war and social cuts. In this framework, the techniques of drone killing developed to terrorize ex-colonial countries occupied by US imperialism would be available to be turned against American working people.

In the course of more than a decade of war in Afghanistan, Washington and its NATO allies have descended to forms of barbarism that would have been recognizable to the region’s 19th century British colonial overlords, who ruled it through periodic punitive expeditions and exemplary killings. Today such repression is carried out around the clock, taking full advantage of 21st century technology.

Pakistanis are terrorized by the constant sound of drones flying overhead. With US drones firing freely on civilian targets—including medical personnel coming to treat drone strike victims, funerals, schools, and any large gathering of people—social life is shattered by the ever-present fear of death from the sky.

Unsurprisingly, a recent poll by the Pew Research Center found that an overwhelming majority of Pakistanis, 74 percent, consider the United States as an “enemy.”

Last year, international law specialists at Stanford and New York University published a report, “Living Under Drones,” examining US drone strikes in North Waziristan, a Pakistani tribal region on the Afghan border.

According to the report’s executive summary, “Fears have affected behavior. 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. Some community members shy away from gathering in groups, including important tribal dispute-resolution bodies, out of fear that they may attract the attention of drone operators. Some parents

choose to keep their children home, and children injured or traumatized by strikes have dropped out of school. Waziris told our researchers that the strikes have undermined cultural and religious practices related to burial, and made family members afraid to attend funerals.”

The study cited numerous civilians speaking on drone terror. One father of three said, “Drones are always on my mind. It makes it difficult to sleep. They are like a mosquito. Even when you don’t see them, you can hear them, you know they are there.”

Teenager Faheem Qureshi was the sole survivor of a drone strike on his school early in President Obama’s tenure, which fractured his skull and nearly blinded him. He said, “We cannot learn things because we are always in fear of the drones hovering over us, and it really scares the small kids who go to school. At the time the drone struck, I had to take exams, but I couldn’t take exams after that because it weakened my brain. I couldn’t learn things and it affected me emotionally.”

A 45-year-old Pakistani farmer explained that a drone destroyed his house, which was empty as his family worked in the field. He said, “I was extremely sad, because normally a house costs around 10 lakh or 1 million rupees [US\$10,593], and I don’t even have 5,000 rupees [US\$53] now. I spent my whole life in that house; my father had lived here as well. There is a big difference between having your own home and living on rent or mortgage ... I belong to a poor family and my home has been destroyed.”

A Waziri journalist said, “If I’m shopping, I’m really careful and scared. If I’m standing on the road and there is a car parked next to me, I never know if that is going to be the target. Maybe they will target the car in front of me or behind me. Even in mosques, if we’re praying, we’re worried that maybe one person who is standing with us praying is wanted. So wherever we are, we have this fear of drones.”



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