

UK base carrying out Afghan drone strikes

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The British Ministry of Defence (MoD) announced last Thursday that remote controlled armed drones, used to murder and maim insurgents and civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan, are now being operated from the UK for the first time.

The UK's armed forces have been using drones, officially known as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), to monitor and attack insurgents in Afghanistan for at least six years. Previously these missions had been operated from the Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, as the British military did not have the capability to operate them from UK soil.

At Creech the drones were operated by the Royal Air Force's (RAF) 39 Squadron. Described as an "elite unit formed in some haste during 2007", the unit used state of the art surveillance technology to carry out sneak attacks on people several thousand miles away.

On Thursday it was acknowledged that a specially created mission base—operational since October—at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire, England is now directing the drones.

In a deliberately vague statement the RAF said it had commenced supporting the International Security Assistance Force and Afghan ground troops with "armed intelligence and surveillance missions" remotely piloted from RAF Waddington.

There is no information on the individual missions flown from the UK, which are operated by RAF 13 Squadron and consist of 100 specially trained personnel. The *Telegraph* reported that the drones "take off and land under the guidance of pilots on the ground in Afghanistan but the pilots in Lincolnshire take over once they've reached a suitable height. They normally fly at between 15,000 to 20,000 feet."

Last year the MoD stepped up its Afghanistan drone fleet by purchasing five more US-made MQ-9 Reaper drones, costing \$16.9 million, to add to the five it already operated. The 10 will be operated from RAF

Waddington in collaboration with the team in the US. Each is able to carry up to 14 Hellfire "tank-buster" air-to-surface missiles.

Only a fraction of information on the death and destruction drones inflict ever reaches the public domain. The RAF's claim that they are used for "armed intelligence and surveillance missions" is aimed at concealing that their main purpose is to terrorise on a mass scale. Kat Craig, legal director of human rights charity Reprieve, recently commented, "The nature of drones means they hover above communities 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They present an aerial occupation, almost a form of collective punishment, that causes huge concern and distress to people living in those communities."

RAF controlled drones have been a critical component of the filthy imperialist adventure in Afghanistan, having flown 45,000 hours in the last six years (an average of 20 hours per day) and fired around 350 weapons.

The RAF also leases the Israeli-made Hermes 450. According to the flightglobal.com web site in October 2012, "more than 60,000 flight hours had been logged with Hermes 450s over Afghanistan and also previously Iraq under the urgent operational requirement service by early this year."

A November 2011 report by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported that the UK will "spend over half a billion pounds on acquiring and sustaining armed Reaper drones on operations in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2015."

At that time the RAF were, according to the Bureau's report, "providing more than 1,200 hours of air support per month for the UK's Afghan operations."

The RAF is continually upgrading its drone warfare capability. It is intended that, by 2030, these will comprise 30 percent of the RAF's capacity. Some £2 billion is being spent on upgrading to a new fleet of 30

drones, known as “The Scavenger programme,” which will be operational by the end of the decade.

The MoD publicly states that it has no record of figures on those killed as a result of drone strikes, whether “insurgent” or civilian. However, in December 2010 Prime Minister David Cameron bragged that 124 insurgents had been killed by British drone strikes up to that point. He has not been so forthcoming in giving details of the civilians slaughtered in cold blood by British drones, including the four killed and two injured when a drone blasted two trucks on the ground in the Now Zad district of north Helmand in July 2011.

These murders are just a fraction of those killed in drone attacks by the United States. The most recent estimates, according to research by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, suggest that in Pakistan alone US drones killed up to 3,533 people between 2004 and 2013. About 890 of these are estimated to be civilians, of which an estimated 168 to 197 were children. Another 1,173 to 1,472 people were also injured. The majority of attacks were carried out under the administration of Barack Obama.

In December last year, the High Court in London rejected a request for a judicial inquiry into the alleged role of the UK’s Government Communications Headquarters spy centre in aiding US drone strikes in Pakistan’s northwest region. The case was brought by Noor Khan, a Pakistani man whose father was killed, along with 49 other people, by a US drone attack on March 17, 2011. Khan’s father, Malik Daud Khan, was chairing a peaceful tribal assembly meeting to discuss chromite mining rights in North Waziristan when he was killed by several missile strikes.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat government has refused to comment on any aspect of the allegations. Lawyers for Foreign Secretary William Hague told the court that it was “territory of extreme sensitivity”. It would be “‘prejudicial to the national interest’ for them even to explain their understanding of the legal basis for any such activities”, they added.

Following the announcement that the new drones will be operated from RAF Waddington, the media largely sought to play down their crucial military role in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as their planned usage in further imperialist brigandage. BBC defence correspondent Caroline Wyatt blithely reported that the “overwhelming majority” of missions the British

drones are used for involve surveillance. She added, “The UK has used its military drones and pilots only in areas acknowledged as conflict zones such as Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, while RAF drones do not take part in the CIA programme.”

The BBC kept up its propaganda following a demonstration by 400 people on Saturday protesting the use of drones and calling for their banning. The march began in the nearby town of Lincoln and ended at the heavily guarded perimeter fence of RAF Waddington.

BBC reporter Ed Thomas concluded his report from the protest by citing UK government statements defending the increased use of drones. Thomas repeated the bare-faced lie that “it also says that the drones are not only saving military lives but also civilian lives in Afghanistan.”



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