Death toll from Trump-Hegseth boat murders reaches 65

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In a further act of international piracy, the US military carried out a lethal strike on a small boat in the Caribbean Sea Saturday, killing three men whom Secretary of War Pete Hegseth labeled "narco-terrorists," without offering any evidence.

The latest attack is the 15th such remote-controlled strike since September 2, when US President Trump first ordered the Pentagon to destroy boats in the Caribbean and the eastern Pacific which were allegedly involved in drug smuggling. The death toll has reached 65, after the Mexican Navy announced that it had found no trace of a supposed survivor of an October 27 strike in the Pacific Ocean.

The attacks, apparently using drone-fired missiles and other guided weapons, are flagrantly illegal under both US and international law. Even if all of the boats were engaged in drug smuggling—and no evidence has been offered to prove this—they were not stopped, their cargo was not seized and their crews were not arrested. Instead, they were simply annihilated.

Under US law, drug trafficking does not carry the death penalty, and all of the victims were executed without a trial or any form of judicial proceeding. Under international law, the murderous actions amount to piracy.

According to reports stemming from a military briefing Thursday for members of the House of Representatives, the Pentagon could not even provide the names of those killed, because their identities were not known, despite claims of "exquisite intelligence" by House Speaker Mike Johnson.

The latest strike on a small boat coincided with the arrival of the USS Gerald R. Ford in the Caribbean Sea, off the coast of Venezuela. The largest ship in the US Navy, with a displacement of 100,000 tons and a crew of more than 4,500, the aircraft carrier can deploy nearly 100 warplanes and attack helicopters, three times as many as the entire Venezuelan air force.

The arrival of the aircraft carrier completes the assembling of a flotilla capable of waging war on the South American country, which has been targeted by successive US administrations because it has the world's largest oil reserves and a government, headed for 15 years by Hugo Chavez and, since 2013, by Nicolas Maduro, which has been at odds with US foreign policy in the region.

The White House and Pentagon have steadily increased the pressure on the Maduro regime over the past three months. On August 7, the State Department doubled to $50 million the bounty offered for the capture or demise of Maduro. On September 2, attacks on small Venezuelan fishing boats began. On October 10, the Norwegian parliament awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Maria Corina Machado, the ultra-right politician and coup plotter selected by Washington as Maduro's replacement. Also last month, Trump announced that he had authorized CIA covert action inside Venezuela against the country's government.

While boasting of the great military "success" of blowing small boats out of the water with satellite-guided missiles and bombs, Trump indicated last week that there would be operations on land as well, although he portrayed them as air strikes against "drug labs," continuing the pretense that the US goal is to shut down drug trafficking rather than carrying out regime change.

The Department of Justice (DoJ) informed Congress last week that Trump had initiated a formal armed conflict with "drug cartels" on September 4, and that this started the 60-day clock running for the president to report on the outcome of this conflict. Under the 1973 War Powers Resolution, the president "shall terminate" such military operations after 60 days,

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unless authorized to continue by Congress, but there is no indication that Trump will comply with that requirement on Monday, November 3.

Instead, according to the head of the DoJ's Office of Legal Counsel, T. Elliot Gaiser, the Trump administration does not regard the boat strikes as "hostilities" covered by the 60-day limit, because there is no danger to US forces.

One official told the *New York Times* in an email, "The operation comprises precise strikes conducted largely by unmanned aerial vehicles launched from naval vessels in international waters at distances too far away for the crews of the targeted vessels to endanger American personnel."

In other words, because the victims of the strikes are fishermen who cannot resist being incinerated by US missiles and bombs, the killings can continue indefinitely.

The impatience of the White House with any form of congressional restraint or oversight was on display last Wednesday, when the Pentagon held a briefing for selected senators on the boat strikes, but invited only Republicans. Senate Democrats only learned of the briefing afterwards.

Thursday's briefing of House members did include Democrats, but the information provided on the boat strikes was minimal. Pentagon officials reportedly told the representatives they did not need to know the identities of those killed or even whether they had actually been engaged in drug trafficking.

Democratic Representative Sara Jacobs of California, a former State Department official herself, told the *Times*, "What they told us is they have to show a connection to a designated terrorist organization or their affiliate, and as long as they can show that connection, they believe they are authorized to strike."

This connection could be as much as "three hops away" from a known drug trafficker, Jacobs added (three degrees of separation). Under that standard, given the wide prevalence of narcotics, virtually every human being on the planet could be targeted by the US military.

Senate Democrats sent a letter Friday to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and Hegseth asking for detailed information about the strikes, including "all legal opinions related to these strikes and a list of the groups or other entities the President has deemed targetable."

The principal concern of the congressional Democrats is that Trump is carrying out the boat strikes unilaterally, without engaging in the usual consultation with Congress, as Democrat Barack Obama did during the US-NATO air strikes against Libya, or Trump himself did during his first term when he authorized strikes on targets in the Middle East.

There has been little criticism of the strikes themselves, and no Democrat has suggested that ordering these killings is grounds for impeachment. Under the Supreme Court's ruling last year, Trump cannot be prosecuted criminally for any action he takes in his official capacity, such as issuing an order to the Pentagon to carry out remote-controlled murders.

Moreover, the rationale offered by Trump and Hegseth for the boat strikes is virtually identical to that provided by Obama, when the Democratic president ordered drone missile strikes against supposed Al Qaeda supporters—including American citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, killed by a drone-fired missile in Yemen in September 2011.

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