

US ramps up boat strikes in Latin American waters amid mounting proof that victims are fishermen

Andrea Lobo
22 April 2026

A rare case of survivors of US missile strikes on small boats off the coasts of South America has produced damning evidence that the Pentagon's killing spree in the Eastern Pacific and Caribbean is targeting not drug traffickers, but impoverished fishermen.

Ecuadorian fishermen aboard the vessel *Don Maca* have testified that they were subjected on March 26 to what they describe as a "double tap" strike by a US drone and then detained, handcuffed, hooded and held at gunpoint by soldiers aboard a US-flagged patrol vessel.

This campaign of extrajudicial killings has gone largely unreported in the US media, even as it has expanded dramatically in recent months. Not a single major US corporate media outlet has recounted the testimony of the fishermen who survived US strikes.

The *Don Maca*, a 35-ton fishing vessel operating alongside six smaller boats, had departed roughly a week earlier from the Ecuadorian port of Manta. On March 26, while approximately 200 miles northwest of the Galápagos Islands, the vessel disappeared.

Its 20 crew members were engaged in routine fishing activity when the attack occurred.

"We were just working, waiting for the last trawler to return," said Jhonny Sebastián Palacios. "Everything was perfectly fine." Moments later, a drone strike tore through the vessel. "I ran upstairs and saw the boat destroyed... The whole ship was stripped bare," he said to *The Guardian*.

Several crew members were seriously injured. Erick Fabricio Coello Saltos, 27, who has been left 90 percent blind by the attack also described ruptured eardrums and shrapnel wounds: "When I heard an explosion, my eardrums ruptured terribly... I was covered in blood."

As the *Don Maca* burned, survivors were seized by US forces. "We were terrified they were going to kill us," Palacios recounted. A lawyer for the crew described the ordeal as "psychological torture," marked by sensory deprivation and the constant threat of execution.

The fishermen report being held aboard a US vessel before being transferred to a Salvadoran patrol boat. They were taken to El Salvador after several days at sea, interrogated at a military base, and eventually handed over to immigration authorities. During this time, their families conducted a desperate search for the missing men.

Palacios emerged deeply shaken. "I get scared in the middle of the night. I can't sleep well. My ears still hurt... I thought they were going to kill us." He added that he would never return to fishing.

The *Don Maca* incident is not isolated. Lawyers are investigating the disappearance of another Ecuadorian vessel, the *Fiorella*, missing for three months with eight crew members onboard. Survivors and

relatives across the region have repeatedly testified that those targeted had no connection to drug trafficking.

Earlier this month, Hernán Flores, captain of the *Negra Francisca Duarte II*, described a nearly identical attack on March 17 near the Galápagos. A US drone bombed and sank his vessel, forcing the 16 crew members to jump from the burning ship and survive for eight days in lifeboats.

Several fishermen suffered severe injuries. The crew managed to stay afloat and used small boats to escape the flames. After reaching safety, they approached a nearby vessel for help, only to be met with hostility by US soldiers. They were eventually found a week later adrift by a Salvadoran ship.

Jorge Chiriboga, a lawyer representing some of the fishermen told the Ecuadorian news site *Primicias*, "This is an act of terror against fishermen in the exclusive economic zone of the Ecuadorian state; therefore, it is Ecuador, the state, the government that has to protect the interests of Ecuadorian citizens."

The right-wing regime of President Daniel Noboa, heir to a billion-dollar banana fortune who holds US citizenship, has shown no interest whatsoever in defending the interests of the fishermen, handing the Pentagon the "right" to murder as many Ecuadorians as it pleases. Government officials have insinuated, without any evidence whatsoever, that the fishermen may have been involved in illicit activity. The United Nations office on forced disappearances, meanwhile, has felt compelled to demand that the government pursue the case of the eight missing crew members of the *Fiorella*.

In a February 2026 State of the Union address, Donald Trump jokingly remarked that US operations had been so aggressive that "nobody wants to go fishing anymore"—a remark that, in light of these testimonies, takes on a chilling literal meaning. Trump has often repeated his "joke" with apparent sadistic glee over the slaughter of innocent workers.

Since the launch of what has been dubbed Operation Southern Spear in September, the US military has carried out at least 53 recorded strikes, killing no fewer than 181 civilians aboard fishing vessels.

Official press releases by the US Southern Command outline a relentless escalation. Between April 11 and April 19 alone, five lethal strikes took place in the Eastern Pacific. In each case, the justification rests solely on claims that vessels were traveling along "known trafficking routes."

No verifiable evidence has been provided to substantiate these assertions.

In fact, efforts to investigate these crimes have met with systematic

obstruction. Reporting by *The Intercept* indicates that the US State Department pressured the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), an arm of the Organization of American States, to shift its focus away from the killings.

Following a March 13 IACHR hearing—where the American Civil Liberties Union, the Center for Constitutional Rights, the International Crisis Group and a UN special rapporteur argued that the strikes violate both domestic and international law—US officials urged the commission to “move onto other matters.” Former IACHR leadership warned that the body fears the “wrath” of Washington, its largest financial backer.

Meanwhile, victims’ families have begun pursuing legal action. The relatives of Colombian fisherman Alejandro Carranza, killed in a September 15 strike, filed a complaint naming Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth as responsible. They describe Carranza not as a trafficker, but as a lifelong fisherman and father of four.

Similarly, families of Trinidadian victims Chad Joseph and Rishi Samaroo have filed a wrongful death lawsuit, with legal teams describing the campaign as “unprecedented and manifestly unlawful.”

These operations provided the pretext for a massive US deployment, culminating in the January 3 bombing of Caracas and other Venezuelan targets, which killed more than 100 people and resulted in the kidnapping of President Nicolás Maduro.

“Operation Total Extermination”

In March, the US and Ecuador’s President Noboa announced joint land operations. Joseph Humire, a senior Pentagon official, told Congress that boat attacks were “just the beginning,” unveiling “Operation Total Extermination” along the Ecuadorian-Colombian border.

Testimony has since emerged that these operations have targeted rural communities, destroying homes and agricultural infrastructure while detaining and torturing workers.

Simultaneously, the US is expanding its intelligence and law enforcement footprint, with the FBI opening an office in Quito and establishing a permanent presence in Costa Rica. New bilateral agreements further deepen US control over regional security operations.

These developments coincide with large-scale military exercises, including Southern Seas 2026, led by US Southern Command. The deployment of major naval assets, including carrier strike groups, underscores the strategic scope of the buildup.

In the Eastern Pacific, Washington has also targeted economic infrastructure tied to China, particularly Peru’s Chancay megaport. US officials have openly threatened to “take back” the port from its Chinese operator, echoing earlier threats against the Panama Canal and revealing the geopolitical dimension of the campaign.

In the Caribbean, naval deployments continue, alongside intensified reconnaissance drone flights near Cuba, amid preparations for potential military operations for regime change.

The connection between these developments is unmistakable. Under the banner of combating drug trafficking, the United States is asserting military dominance over the hemisphere, treating it as its exclusive sphere of influence while countering China’s increasing investment and trade ties to the region.

The doctrine underpinning this strategy—referred to as “Greater North America” by Hegseth—bears a chilling resemblance to the expansionist ideology of Nazis’ “Greater Germany.” Like its historical predecessor, it combines territorial ambition with the systematic dehumanization of targeted populations.

The methods employed are equally revealing. The extrajudicial killing of fishermen through drone strikes—based on unverified intelligence and without due process—serves to normalize the assertion that the US state has the right to kill anyone, anywhere in the hemisphere, on the basis of mere suspicion, including in the US itself.

No confidence can be placed in any faction of the US political establishment to halt these crimes. House Democrats have filed articles of impeachment against Pete Hegseth, including charges related to unauthorized war-making in Iran and the deadly strikes on suspected drug smuggling boats.

However, this effort is a sham. With Republicans controlling Congress, the impeachment has virtually no chance of success and serves primarily as a political gesture. At the same time, the Democratic Party has consistently voted to fund the very military operations it now nominally criticizes, underscoring its complicity in the ongoing bloodshed.

Nor can any reliance be placed on the so-called “left” nationalist governments in Latin America. In October, Colombian President Gustavo Petro and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum denounced the strikes as illegal. “When a missile is used against a boat with unarmed people, what is committed is an extrajudicial execution,” Petro declared.

Yet following the January 3 abduction of Maduro and the subsequent escalation of US aggression, these criticisms have given way to silence. Neither Petro nor Sheinbaum—nor Brazil’s President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—raised any opposition to the ongoing killings during the so-called Progressive summit in Barcelona this weekend.

This silence reflects the organic incapacity of these governments, rooted in their own national capitalist elites, to mount any genuine opposition to US imperialism. Their earlier denunciations have proven to be empty rhetoric, quickly abandoned in the face of mounting pressure from Washington.

What is unfolding in the waters of the Eastern Pacific and Caribbean is not a “war on drugs,” but a campaign of terror against workers. The evidence makes clear that the bloodiest and most shameless mass murderers and criminals are not hidden in remote jungles or at sea—they are seated in positions of power in Washington D.C., directing a campaign that treats human life as expendable in the pursuit of US hegemony.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)