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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Kevin Reed
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US military testing domestic wide-area surveillance with high-altitude balloons

A report in the *Guardian* on August 2 revealed that the US military is conducting a “wide-area surveillance test across six midwest states using experimental high-altitude balloons.” The test—which involves up to 25 unmanned solar-powered balloons launched from rural South Dakota and drifting 250 miles through an area spanning portions of Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois and Missouri—was uncovered from documents filed with the Federal Communications Commission.

According to the FCC document, titled “Experimental Special Temporary Authorization,” shared with the *Guardian*, the Pentagon contractor Sierra Nevada Corporation (SNC) was given permission to conduct “high altitude MESH networking tests over South Dakota to provide a persistent surveillance system to locate and deter narcotic trafficking and homeland security threats” between July 12 and September 1, 2019.

A mesh network is a type of communications infrastructure whereby every node (in this case a balloon) is connected to and interacts with all other nodes (the other balloons) dynamically to exchange information and transmit it to receivers on the ground.



US Army

high-altitude wide-area persistent surveillance balloon [Credit: US Army]

The *Guardian* quotes Arthur Holland Michel, the co-director of the Center for the Study of the Drone at Bard College in New York, who said, “What this new technology proposes is to watch everything at once. Sometimes it’s referred to as ‘combat TiVo’ because when an event happens somewhere in the surveilled area, you can potentially rewind the tape to see exactly what occurred, and rewind even further to see who was involved and where they came from.”

Each of the SNC balloons is equipped with “satellite-like vehicles” with sophisticated sensors that can detect moving objects within a 25-mile radius. The balloons also have nine high-resolution cameras capable of recording panoramic images that are then stitched together simultaneously to provide a wide-area view of entire cities. The SNC balloons will fly at altitudes of up to 65,000 feet and carry hi-tech radar designed to “track many individual vehicles day or night, through any kind of weather.”

According to the *Guardian*, the surveillance test has been commissioned by the US Southern Command (Southcom), a joint effort by the US army, navy, air force and other forces responsible for disaster response, intelligence operations and security cooperation in the Caribbean and Central and South America.

The FCC documents say that the networking technology also includes video indicating that the SNC system will deploy the so-called Gorgon Stare technology of the US Air Force. Gorgon Stare is a Wide-Area Persistent Surveillance (WAPS) system with Wide-

Area Motion Imagery (WAMI) capability. According to an SNC press release from July 2014, an earlier iteration of Gorgon Stare was deployed for reconnaissance in Afghanistan and it “provides unprecedented, real-time situational awareness—both for troops in contact and commanders who are directing large scale operations.”

The Sierra Nevada Company was founded in 1963 and has been a contractor for the Pentagon providing a range of software and hardware technologies since the 1990s. According to a description on the company website, “SNC is a trusted leader in solving the world’s toughest challenges through advanced engineering technologies in Space Systems, Commercial Solutions, and National Security and Defense.”

The *Guardian* reported that SNC has been providing the US military with surveillance equipment on manned aircraft for many years. With the unmanned balloons, the contractor is able to offer Southcom the promise of “a cheap surveillance platform that could follow multiple cars and boats for extended periods.” It is not clear what will become of the images and data that are gathered during the test.

While the *Guardian* did not receive a response to questions posed to SNC or Southcom, it did speak with representatives of other military contractors such as World View, a competitor for the Pentagon’s balloon business, and Raven Aerostar, the manufacturer of the balloons used in the South Dakota tests. Executives for both World View and Raven Aerostar confirmed that the SNC test is one of dozens of experiments to perfect “stratospheric balloon navigation” and wide-area surveillance.

The report also said it was unclear from the FCC documents whether “the test within the US were connected to any active narcotic or counter-terrorism investigation.” In other words, the US government is deepening its illegal surveillance of the American public with fraudulent claims that it is fighting “crime” and “terrorism.”

Jay Stanley, a senior policy analyst at the American Civil Liberties Union, responded to the revelations, “Even in tests, they’re still collecting a lot of data on Americans: who’s driving to the union house, the church, the mosque, the Alzheimer’s clinic. We should not go down the road of allowing this to be used in the United States and it’s disturbing to hear that these tests are being carried out, by the military no less.”

Former intelligence officer Edward Snowden—who exposed NSA spying on the electronic communications of the entire population in 2013—said, “They always tell us the tools of mass surveillance are intended for use only against the faraway Other; the

foreign enemy, the terrorist, the criminal. And then, just a few years later, we realize precisely the same system secretly surrounds us at home.”

There is absolutely no reason to believe that the US Southern Command is testing domestic surveillance systems for unnamed “narcotics trafficking” or “terrorism” purposes. The exposure of a massive secret Pentagon eye-in-the-sky surveillance program across six states is further evidence that the military-intelligence state is well advanced in its preparations for major confrontations with the working class within the US.

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