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Obama's Drone Killing Campaigns Two Human Rights Groups Blast Program

by DAVID LINDORFF

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Last week President Obama was largely successful at blacking out from the American public word that Nobel Peace Prize nominee Malala Yousafzai, the courageous Pakistani advocate of girls' education nearly killed by Taliban gunmen a year ago, used a photo-op invitation to the White House to ask the president to halt to his drone killings of Pakistanis. But Obama cannot so easily silence the condemnations today of his remote drone "Murder, Inc." program by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

In a pair of reports released yesterday, the two respected human rights organizations blasted the US for its use of missile-firing drone aircraft over Pakistan and Yemen to kill alleged Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders, saying that both campaigns were causing extensive civilian deaths. Both reports — Human Right's Watch's report on the Yemen drone campaign, and Amnesty International's report on the much larger Pakistani drone campaign, assert that the heavy civilian casualties from the strikes may constitute war crimes. The Amnesty report goes further, suggesting that even leaving aside the civilian killings, the extra-judicial killing of Taliban and Qaeda leaders themselves constitute war crimes under the Geneva codes.

While drone strikes date back to the presidency of Bill Clinton, and were employed to a significant extent in Afghanistan and Pakistan under President George W. Bush, since President Obama took office in January 2009, the frequency of drone-fired missile attacks, particularly in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province, has soared. One analysis by the New America Foundation suggests that there have been 365 such strikes there—313 of them on Obama's watch as commander in chief. These attacks are said to have killed between 1,611 and 2767 militants, along with between 258 and 307 civilians. Other estimates of civilian casualties are higher, with the organization Drones Watch, which investigates drone strikes by the US in Pakistan, reporting that as of last January over 3000 people had been killed, "the vast majority of them civilians." That report gave the names and ages of 172 of the dead in those attacks who were all children.

One reason for the discrepancy in the numbers is that the CIA and the Pentagon do not reveal the details of drone strikes, and in fact for the most part do not report them at all. When there are reports, almost all those killed are identified as "enemy combatants," as the US considers all males over the age of 12 to be enemy fighters — itself a violation of Geneva Conventions signed by the US, which require all those under the age of 16 to be classified as "protected civilians." This means military forces must make "special efforts" to protect them from harm.

Amnesty International blasts the US for its policy of secrecy which classifies all after-action reports on drone strikes, and says this policy makes investigating the results of US drone attacks difficult. But the organization goes on to say, "What is certain from Amnesty International's research, however, is that the cases in this report raise serious concerns that the USA has unlawfully killed people in drone strikes, and that such killings may amount in some cases to extrajudicial executions or war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law."

15-year-old Yousafzai, sitting as a guest between the president and Michelle Obama, with Obama's older daughter Malia looking on, told the president that the drone attacks on her people in Pakistan, besides killing children and other civilians, were making things worse in her country, by causing resentment among Pakistanis and "fueling terrorism." It's an argument that even many senior military and intelligence people have been making.

But it hasn't seemed to have changed White House thinking about the drone strikes. Last May, in a speech at the National Defense (sic) University, the president defended his drone killing campaign, saying that while it was true that civilians were dying in these attacks, that is "a risk that exists in every war."

Nobody at that venue, of course, bothered to raise their hand and ask, “In Pakistan and Yemen? What war?” But they should have, because of course the US is *not at war* against either country. And that’s part of the problem. The reason the US uses drones to do its targeted — or not so targeted — killing in those two nations is because it can do it without ever facing the embarrassment of having a plane shot down or an engine stall and then having a US pilot captured and charged with murder or with a war crime.

In the end, there will certainly be international rules established for the use of drones to launch deadly attacks, if only because the technology that is currently a virtual monopoly of the United States, like nuclear weapons in the late 1940s, is spreading quickly. Already, China is selling several drones on the global market, including one powered by a jet engine, which appear to be quite similar to well-known US drones. The Yilong (Pterodactyl) looks remarkably like a US Predator drone, at nearly 29 feet in length with a range of 2500 miles, and with missile-firing capability, while the jet-powered Xianglong (Soaring Dragon), at 45 feet in length with a high-altitude range of nearly 5000 miles at nearly 500 mph, could prove lethal in many ways.

Russia has announced plans to catch up with the US quickly in the drone field, and given its aviation expertise, should have little trouble doing so.

Even Iran, whose scientists managed to hack and take over the controls of a jet-powered US spy drone, successfully landing it at an Iranian airport, should be getting into the drone business at some point. Its scientists claim to have already back-engineered the captured drone’s stealth technology, and to have fully cracked its computer code.

If drones proliferate to many countries, and even worse, fall into the hands of non-governmental organizations, it won’t be long before Americans will have to look up at drones with the same kind of anxiety that Pakistanis and Yemenis do today.

Of course, given the expressed desire of federal, state and local intelligence and law-enforcement organizations within the US to buy and operate spy drones — and even armed attack drones — there may be even more reasons for Americans to head for cover when a drone appears in the air.