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US accused of double standards on civilians killed by drones

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President Barack Obama has publicly acknowledged that a US drone strike killed two Western aid workers. But hundreds of civilian deaths in similar strikes across the Muslim world remain shrouded in official secrecy.

The United States government has never revealed how many civilians have been killed by its drones, the weapon of choice in its campaign against Islamist militants. But on Thursday, President Barack Obama did publicly admit that two Western aid workers had become collateral damage.

Warren Weinstein and Giovanni Lo Porto were killed with their al Qaeda captors in a US drone strike in January. Though the strike occurred months ago, the White House claims that it confirmed the deaths of the two Western hostages only in the past few days, and has said it will compensate their families.

The strike hit a compound in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, according to the US government. But it's unclear who, if anybody, was specifically targeted. Ahmed Farouq, an alleged American member of al Qaeda, was killed in the same strike. But the White House says

it had no knowledge of his presence in the compound beforehand. A separate operation in the same region killed another alleged American member of al Qaeda, Adam Gadahn. He too was not specifically targeted, according to the administration.



The CIA's drone program remains shrouded in official secrecy

Weinstein, a 73-year-old American doctor, was taken hostage in 2011 in the city of Lahore. Lo Porto, a 39-year-old Italian, went missing in 2012 after arriving in Pakistan to work for the German aid agency Welthungerhilfe. The White House said it also had no knowledge of their presence in the compound prior to the strike.

"As a husband and as a father, I cannot begin to imagine the anguish that the Weinstein and Lo Porto families are enduring today," President Obama said in a press conference. "I realize that there are no words that can ever equal their loss. I know that there's nothing I can ever say or do to ease their heartache."

"As president and commander in chief, I take full responsibility for all our counter-terrorism operations, including the one that inadvertently took the lives of Warren and Giovanni," the president said. "I profoundly regret what happened. On behalf of the United States government, I offer our deepest apologies to the families."

'Unconscionable double standard'

Obama went on to say that as soon as the US determined the cause of Warren and Giovanni's deaths, he ordered the operation declassified, because "the Weinstein and Lo Porto families deserve to know the truth" and America is a "democracy committed to openness in good times and in bad."

But the families of Pakistani, Somali and Yemeni civilians have not been given the same consideration, according to Letta Tayler, a senior counter-terrorism researcher at Human Rights Watch.

Though the US government has not revealed the number of civilians killed in its drone war, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reports that at least 486 innocent people have been killed by strikes in Pakistan and Yemen in the past decade. More than 1,000 civilians may have died in the

clandestine campaign, according to the Bureau. Drone strikes have also occurred in Somalia and Afghanistan.

"It's exceedingly rare that the US acknowledges killing a civilian in a drone strike," Tayler told DW. "In the cases that I've looked at, the US has only made this acknowledgment when it's killed an American, or in this the case the citizen of a country that's allied with the United States."

"This is an unconscionable double standard," Tayler said. "It is outrageous that the US will not own up to killing non-Western civilians in the same fashion."

'US didn't know who it was killing'

According to Tayler, part of the problem is that the US drone war has largely been conducted by the CIA, which by its nature is a clandestine organization. She said the president should place the program under the supervision of the Defense Department, which is governed - at least in theory - by stricter rules on transparency.



Over 1,000 civilians may have died in the campaign, one organization estimates

"I hope these two tragic killings will prompt the Obama administration and the American public to revisit the policy of silence that hangs over this vast secret killing program," Tayler said. "President Obama himself promised greater transparency on drone strikes in what his administration touted as a landmark speech in May of 2013 and two years later we've seen almost no progress."

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has filed three lawsuits to make details about the drone program public. The suits would force the US government to disclose information regarding the legal justification for drone strikes, how targets are picked, "before-the-fact" assessments of civilian casualties, "after-action" investigations of who was killed, and the number people killed and their affiliations.

"These new disclosures raise troubling questions about the reliability of the intelligence that the government is using to justify drone strikes," Jameel Jaffer, the ACLU's deputy legal director,

said in a press release responding to the deaths of Weinstein and Lo Porto. "In each of the operations acknowledged today, the US quite literally didn't know who it was killing."

"Unfortunately, the president's stated commitment to transparency can't be squared with the secrecy that still shrouds virtually every aspect of the government's drone program," Jaffer said.