

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2015/04/28/264635/when-us-strikes-go-wrong-not-all.html>

When U.S. strikes go wrong, not all civilian lives are equal

By Hannah Allam

April 28, 2015



A Reaper drone aircraft comes in for a landing during a training program at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada. RICK LOOMIS

The unusual announcement by President Barack Obama last week that a U.S. strike on an al Qaida compound in Pakistan inadvertently had killed two hostages – one a U.S. citizen, the other Italian – came with an apology and the speedy pledge of monetary compensation for the families.

None of that happened for another American who was killed in a U.S. strike in 2011. Abdulrahman al Awlaki, the 16-year-old son of al Qaida propagandist Anwar al Awlaki, wasn't believed to have been involved in militant activities and, by the U.S. government's own version, was an unintended casualty of the U.S. attack that killed him in Yemen.

Yet four years on, despite a media campaign and a lawsuit, the Obama administration has not apologized for the killing or offered compensation to the Awlaki family. Human rights advocates say the reason is that, when it comes to making amends for civilian deaths in U.S. counterterrorism operations, not all lives are valued the same – even when they're American.

“All that Abdulrahman's family got was an acknowledgment that Abdulrahman had been killed and that he had not been specifically targeted,” said Hina Shamsi, the director of the American Civil Liberties Union's National Security Project, which handled the Awlaki family's lawsuit. “They received no apology, no investigation, no compensation.”

The chances for official acknowledgment of and compensation for deadly strikes are even dimmer for the many hundreds of non-Western civilian victims, according to rights groups that for years have pushed for the U.S. government to adopt basic standards for addressing such claims.

While there's no firm figure for the number of innocents killed in U.S. operations in the past decade's so-called “War on Terror,” international monitoring groups give estimates that range from many hundreds to the low thousands, primarily from strikes in Pakistan and Yemen. Counterterrorism officials privately counter that the real figure is much lower, no more than 2 percent of the casualties of strikes.

With the U.S. military now bombing Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria – in addition to longstanding counterterrorism operations in Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan and other conflict zones – rights advocates say it's time for a renewed push to close the wide disparities in how the U.S. government handles the fallout when operations go wrong.

The unevenness of the government's approach was never more evident than in the past week, when the president took full, public responsibility for the operation that killed the two hostages: U.S. development expert Warren Weinstein and Italian aid worker Giovanni Lo Porto. Both men were kidnapped years ago in Pakistan and were killed in a strike on an al Qaida compound in January, though the U.S. government doesn't publicly confirm the location, manner or other details of the operation.

In addition to the unprecedented presidential apology, the White House promised compensation for the men's deaths. Officials wouldn't give a dollar figure or divulge other details of the payments, but advocates for civilians in conflict zones said there's no way the case would be handled the same as in lower-profile cases that don't involve Westerners.

In Afghanistan, for example, payouts for civilian deaths typically are capped at \$2,500. Experts say the Weinstein family is much more likely to receive compensation based on insurance-style calculations, similar to payments to the families of victims in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which averaged \$2.08 million dollars for each of the nearly 3,000 dead.

U.S. counterterrorism and military officials didn't respond to requests for comment. Human rights advocates said they're closely watching to see what mechanism is used to determine compensation for Weinstein and Lo Porto deaths.

While it's impossible to know the calculation the administration will use for those cases, it's sure to be above the \$2,500 maximum for an Afghan civilian.

The families of 9/11 victims who were men around Weinstein's age – 73 – received roughly \$1 million each, based on a complex set of factors detailed in government documents about the process. Similar payouts were given to Boston Marathon bombing victims and in the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill – based on calculations by attorney Kenneth Feinberg, a renowned compensation expert.

Victim advocates say the Weinstein and Lo Porto families deserve such payouts – but so, too, do the anguished families of victims whose deaths aren't even acknowledged, much less compensated.

“President Obama and the Obama administration appear to be doing the right things for the Weinstein and Lo Porto families,” said Shamsi of the ACLU. “But the contrast between what those families have received and what virtually all the other families of innocent victims have received is stark, glaring and unfair.”

Beyond the inherent issues of the ethics and transparency of warfare are national security considerations, with rights groups arguing that the United States only creates new enemies when it fails to take responsibility for the loss of innocent lives.

“When you raise your child, you don't teach them to hit someone and walk away and say, ‘Oh, I'm sorry,’” said Marla Keenan, managing director of the Washington-based Center for Civilians In Conflict, or CIVIC, which is lobbying for a policy that sets a standard process for making amends to the families of the wrongly killed. “There's real harm involved, a lasting impact, and it can create an incredible amount of anger on the ground when it's not addressed.”

The investigative journalists of The Intercept, an online publication, revealed how inconsistent compensation payments are by filing a Freedom of Information Act request that yielded examples from Afghanistan such as \$11,000 for an armored vehicle running over a 6-year-old boy's legs and \$1,916 for a boy who drowned in an anti-tank ditch. One stark line from the

report: “A wheelbarrow full of broken mirrors: \$4,057. A child who died in a combat operation: \$2,414.”

Even in headline-making cases where evidence shows that civilians were killed in U.S. operations, American authorities have steered clear of the kind of open accountability displayed after the deaths of Weinstein and Lo Porto.

Yemenis were furious when a U.S. drone strike hit a wedding party. Records provided to the London-based human rights group Reprieve, which monitors civilian casualties of drone strikes, show that the Yemeni government paid more than \$1 million to the families of 12 victims. But no one who’s followed the issue believes the huge sum came from the coffers of impoverished Yemen.

Experts say it’s an open secret that the real source of the payout was the U.S. government, which sought to quell the anger without lifting the veil on a program that operates almost totally out of the public eye, despite Obama’s promises to run a more transparent counterterrorism apparatus than his predecessor.

“The money came from the Department of Defense. No question about it,” said Alka Pradhan, an attorney with Reprieve, which represents several families who’ve lost relatives in U.S. strikes. “They don’t want to say that because that leads to questions about how you’re determining who is a civilian, and that leads to questions about how you’re determining targets, which are all legitimate questions and should be made public.”

Pradhan said that even families who decide to go public with their demands for accountability for civilian deaths rarely get a satisfactory response from the U.S. government.

One of the group’s clients, Faisal bin Ali Jaber, traveled from Yemen to Washington in search of justice after the deaths of his brother-in-law, an imam who preached against al Qaida, and his nephew, age 26, who were killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2012, reportedly while trying to persuade fighters away from al Qaida.

About a year after meeting with White House representatives and members of Congress, Pradhan said, family members received a visit from a Yemeni security official who handed them a bag containing \$100,000 in cash and told them it was from the Americans. Pradhan added that the payment came with “no statement, no apology, no acknowledgment by the U.S. government.”

“The family is infuriated,” she said. “Yes, obviously, the money is helpful, but it’s also a matter of honor for them. It’s insulting to be thrown a bag of cash and be told to go away. This perpetuates the feeling that anyone who’s not white or Western doesn’t matter.”