Accounts of Civilians Killed by Drone Strikes

"Their bodies, carbonized, were fully burned. They could only be identified by their legs and hands. One body was still on fire when he reached there. Then he learned that the carried and mutilated corpses were relatives of his who live in his village, two men and a boy aged seven or eight. They couldn't pick up the charred parts in one piece."

-Told by Pakistani Journalist Safdar Darwar to Kathy Kelly and Josh Brollier

"The drones are fomenting hatred against the government and turning people against America."
-a doctor in Waziristan

"People were in the gardens to water their plantings. The plane without a pilot targeted them and they were killed."

-Agha Jan, a resident of Lashkar Gah

"What happens on the ground is for every one of those (bomb) impacts, you get 5 to 10 times as many recruits for the Taliban as you've eliminated. The people that we're trying to convince to become adherents to our cause have become rigidly hostile to our cause."

-Pierre Sprey, U.S. Air Force strategist

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HISTORY OF DRONES

What Are Drones?

Drones, also known as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), are unmanned aircraft initially designed to collect various forms of data through surveillance. In recent years, they have been equipped with weapons designed to strike a target at a moment's notice. Most drones are flown by a "pilot" at a remote site possibly thousands of miles away, but some advanced drones are fully automated and fly without human control.

Drones started off as small aircraft that could be carried by hand. But the most recent generation of drones, Avengers, have a wingspan of 66 feet and can carry 2,000 pound bombs, while staying in flight for up to 20 hours at a time[1].

Cost of Drones

Drones account for one of every three American military aircraft, costing anywhere from $2 million to $15 million each[2]. U.S. defense budgets have escalated to nearly $700 billion annually, with a sizable portion of that going towards drone development. The U.S. military is currently operating over 7,000 of these unmanned aircraft[3]. A multi-billion dollar industry has been born over the past decade as the acceleration of drone development has begun to outpace that of manned aircraft. It is projected that aerospace war manufacturers will earn over $20 billion in the next decade, not to mention another $20 billion that will go into research and development[4].

Where Are Drones Being Operated?

The majority of drone strikes occur in Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, numerous drone strikes have also occurred in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and Iran[1].

Common Myths Surrounding Drone Warfare

Drones are a safer alternative to manned aircraft because they reduce the risk of harm to American troops.

Pilots of drones are not immune from the negative effects of warfare. While they may not be in immediate bodily harm, studies have shown up to one-third of drone pilots experience "burn out" and high stress, which leads to other psychological conditions including severe depression and PTSD[5]. The majority of these cases are dismissed by the military and people needing treatment and counseling are denied. These types of psychological conditions are the leading reason why veterans are at such a higher risk of suicide.

Drones are a highly accurate weapon against "high-value targets".

The vast majority of victims of drone strikes throughout the history of drone warfare have been innocent civilians. Due to the number of conflicting reports, it is difficult to reach a comprehensive estimate of deaths from drone attacks. One estimate claims that since the beginning of the drone war in Pakistan in 2006, there have been approximately 50 civilian casualties for every one militant casualty[6]. Another source shows up to 2,100 civilians have been killed over the course of 283 drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004[7]. No more than 330 militants have been killed in those strikes.

Drones provide a safe and secure method of retrieving reliable intelligence as to the location and actions of "high-value targets".

There have been several known security flaws in even the most advanced drones. They are relatively easily hacked and susceptible to viruses. In 2011, a seemingly benign keylogging virus struck several drones, but it is still unknown if the virus has been eliminated or if any information was transmitted. In another case, hundreds of hours worth of video recorded by drones were found on the laptops of Iraqi insurgents. The video was obtained through very simple and cheap hacking software[8]. Considering the number of civilian casualties in drone attacks, together with the threat of stolen data, the intelligence gained from drones can hardly be considered accurate and reliable.

Using drones is a cheaper alternative to more conventional means and saves money.

Each drone carries a price tag of at least $2 million, with the latest generation of drones costing $15 million each. In the past decade, $26 billion has been invested in drone development, with another $5 billion scheduled for the 2012 budget[3]. At least 70 drones have been completely destroyed or lost since 2000. The US defense budget continues to increase every year and is by far the largest portion of the federal budget.

Armed drones quickly, safely, and effectively defend ground troops from attacks from militants.

The drones may be quicker than sending piloted aircraft, but because of the necessity of snap decisions for drone pilots, there is a high potential for error. Quicker strikes require less communication and confirmation between commanders and operators, allowing for more mistakes, unnecessary strikes, and the loss of innocent lives. In November 2011, a US drone strike killed 24 Pakistani soldiers[9]. Another strike in Afghanistan in 2011 killed two American troops[10].

[1]*Drone Campaign Network*
[2]Hennigan, W.J. "Air Force Buys Avenger, its biggest and fastest armed drone." *Los Angeles Times*. 31 Dec 2011.
[3]Ackerman, S. "Almost 1 in 3 Warplanes Is a Robot." *WIRED*. 9 Jan 2012.
[4]Kelly, K. "The Predators: Where is Your Democracy?" *vcnv.org*. 9 May 2011.
[5]Martin, R. "Report: High Levels Of 'Burnout' In U.S. Drone Pilots" *NPR*. 19 Dec 2011.
[6]Bergen, P. "Revenge of the Drones." *New America*. 19 Oct 2009.
[7]*Pakistan Bodycount*.
[8]Shachtman, N. "Exclusive: Computer Virus Hits U.S. Drone Fleet." *WIRED*. 7 Oct 2011.
[9]Laskar, R. "NATO attack kills 28 Pak soldiers, Kayani vows 'effective response'." *Indian Express*. 27 Nov 2011.
[10]"Catalogue of errors led to drone attack which killed two U.S. troops in Afghanistan." *Daily Mail*. 7 Nov 2011.