Joint civil society statement on armed drones
UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament and International Security

Delivered by Sophia Wistehube, Human Rights Clinic at Columbia Law School, 10th October 2017

"I no longer love blue skies. In fact, I now prefer grey skies. The drones do not fly when the skies are grey." That's what Zubair Ur-Rehman told a US congressional committee, about a US drone strike which killed his grandmother Mamana as she picked vegetables in a field in Pakistan in 2012. Zubair was just 13 years old at the time.

I am presenting a statement that has been endorsed by 46 civil society organisations, from 17 countries. We are committed to preventing and mitigating harm, including violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, from the use of drones in domestic and international deployments of force.

The use of drones by some states to conduct airstrikes in recent years has caused serious harm in communities, including significant casualties and psychological impacts.

The use of drones by some states has also raised serious legal and ethical concerns, and undermined the rule of law.

For example we are deeply concerned about the US's use of armed drones in places such as Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, to conduct killings of those suspected of affiliation with certain groups, or against groups or individuals who appear to match a particular profile. Our concern is due to the highly questionable legal basis for these strikes; the secrecy; and the harm that communities and families have suffered. We are gravely concerned that some of these air strikes have violated the right to life. Increased operations in Yemen and Somalia, and recent reports that the US administration aims to loosen already limited policy constraints on these activities, only heighten these concerns.

However, this problem is broader than the activities of one state.

The specific features of drone technologies also risk facilitating a global expansion of the use of lethal force, by lowering its political and practical impediments. Some states have been using drones to expand the contexts in which they use explosive weapons, including outside situations of armed conflict.

The use, deployment, and proliferation of drones are therefore serious challenges that require an urgent international response.

We note that there is now an effort underway by states, led by the US, to develop international standards on the export and subsequent use of "armed or strike-enabled UAVs."

However, we are concerned that this initiative risks setting standards that are lower than existing standards, and that will not adequately address the full range of risks, evidence of harm and violations associated with the use of drones. Detailed

recommendations endorsed by many of our organisations on the US-led initiative are linked to from the full online version of this statement.[1]

The process so far has also not been open and inclusive to all states, nor of affected communities, humanitarian, human rights and development actors, nor other civil society experts.

The issues raised by the developing role of drones in the use of force are however global and pertinent to all – international work must not just be dominated by user and producer states.

And, while it is important to address issues of transfers and the practice of new users, use by current possessors and producers continues to be problematic from a humanitarian perspective, and raise serious concerns on compliance with international law and standards. The US-led initiative does not address this, instead focusing on limiting the spread of technology to others.

Unacceptable practice, including that which undermines international law and the rule of law, or involves assistance to facilitate unlawful use, must be rejected – and cannot be ignored or neglected by the international community.

International action and agreement on standards will be key to preventing and mitigating current and future harm to people from the increasing use of armed drones. While the standards under development could represent an important step forward for states, it is clear that further work will be necessary towards agreement on the limits of acceptable use of drones.

We welcome work by UNIDIR this year to convene states and experts in a series of expert meetings for a study on transparency, accountability and oversight over armed drones, and are looking forward to useful recommendations and suggested ways forward for states when it is released this autumn.

We also welcome the publication by the European Parliament subcommittee on Human Rights of a proposal towards an EU common position on the use of armed drones, which outlines principles of transparency and accountability and recommendations on export controls that member states are urged to adopt.

We call for greater attention to be given to the issue of the use of armed drones in all relevant international forums, including in the First Committee, the Human Rights Council and its special procedures.

States, in partnership with international organisations and civil society, should work to prevent and mitigate harm from drones; respond to the rights and needs of victims; account for casualties; and ensure meaningful transparency, accountability, and oversight for these systems.

[1] See ‘Joint civil society statement on US-led drone export initiative,’ available at: http://www.article36.org/updates/joint-statement-standards-sep-17/

Endorsed by:

Alliance of Baptists, US
Amnesty International
Article 36
Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)
CILD (Coalizione Italiana Libertà e Diritti civili)
Coalition for Peace Action
Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines
Committee of 100 in Finland
CorpWatch
Drone Campaign Network
Drone Wars UK
European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR)
Faith Voices Arkansas
Foundation for Fundamental Rights, Pakistan
Gender Advocacy for Justice Initiative (GAJI), Nigeria
Human Rights Clinic (Columbia Law School)
Human Rights First
Human Rights Now, Japan
IANSA Women's Network Nigeria
Interfaith Network on Drone Warfare, US
International Commission of Jurists
International Committee for Robot Arms Control
Israeli Disarmament Movement
Just Foreign Policy
Medact, UK
Mwatana Organization for Human Rights, Yemen
National Council of Churches of Christ in the US
National Religious Campaign Against Torture, US
Nonviolence International Southeast Asia
Nuhanovic Foundation, Netherlands
Omega Research Foundation
On Earth Peace
PAX
Pax Christi Flanders
Peace Action
Peace Movement Aotearoa
Pennsylvania Council of Churches
Rete Italiana per il Disarmo (Italian Disarmament Network)
Scientists for Global Responsibility
SEHLAC Network – Red para la Seguridad Humana en Latinoamérica y el Caribe
Sustainable Peace and Development Organization (SPADO), Pakistan
Whistleblower & Source Protection Program (WHISPeR) at ExposeFacts
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Nigeria
Women's Right to Education Programme (WREP), Nigeria
World Council of Churches

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