

Ferguson and the Militarization of Law Enforcement: African-American Protesters Demand the “Right to Live”

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A UN anti-torture panel that is investigating the United States said on Friday it was deeply concerned by what it described as the high incidence of police brutality and shootings – especially against African-Americans – in the US.

The most basic human right is the right to remain alive. The anger which has swept through Ferguson, Missouri, and has boiled over to other cities across the United States, is an elemental protest against those who have been gradually taking away this right.

The killing of unarmed African-American teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson is only the most publicized instance of daily police killing of unarmed people in the US. Statistically, American citizens are much more likely to be killed by a police officer than by a terrorist.

No complete record of police killings in the US is available. But about 400 police killings a year were listed in a US federal database covering only a fraction of the country during a seven year period ending in 2012. Worse, nearly two times a week a black person was killed by the police in the cities listed in the incomplete report.

Among those killed by US police in the past week or so are Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy in Cleveland, Ohio, who was shot while playing in a park with a toy gun; Akai Gurley, whose only crime was walking down a dark staircase in his own apartment building in New York City; and Leonardo Marquette Little at a traffic signal in Jacksonville, Florida, who police claimed turned violent while resisting arrest.

To fully understand the epidemic of police killings, we have to see them in the broader context of the progressive militarization of US society. In the past 15 years the US has engaged in a series of wars, military occupations, bombings, air strikes and destabilization of other countries. These wars have inured a large part of the population, and of the police, to endless waves of military activities and related violence. Government reports show that about 20 percent of the US federal government budget is devoted to military costs. But the US War Resisters' League, taking into account a broader set of military-related costs, estimates that about half the federal budget is devoted to the military.

A large amount of military equipment bought with this money has been turned over to civilian police departments, perhaps out of fear that declining living standards in the US could lead to mass unrest by American working people.

In 2013 alone, about \$450 million worth of military equipment was transferred to civilian police departments. The transferred equipment includes military vehicles such as armored personnel carriers, and automatic rifles and grenades.

It's important to note that this military-grade equipment was being prepared for action not against a foreign country or an external enemy, but for possible use against American citizens. Though these military hardware were not used in most of the police killings, its deployment by civilian police departments signals the possibility – and the threat – of police using deadly military force against civilians.

This threat appeared in full view almost immediately after the death of Michael Brown. Millions of TV and Internet viewers beheld sights previously seen only in US foreign wars or enacted by foreign military and dictators in other countries. There were tanks in the streets and riot police decked in military camouflage were aiming their automatic rifles from atop military vehicles and platforms at demonstrators, and tear gas and rubber bullets were fired to quell protesters.

More than one Ferguson resident said it looked as if their city was “under military occupation”. To add insult to injury, the policeman responsible for killing Michael Brown has been exonerated after a grand jury process held away from public view.

It is for these reasons, and because of the endless attacks on the basic human right to be alive, that the storm of protest and anger has swept through Ferguson and other cities of the US.

The author is a Canadian freelance writer.

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