

UN Human Rights Rapporteur Calls on US to End the CIA's Drone War in Pakistan

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Global Research, September 19, 2012

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [United Nations](#)

In a surprising, yet positive, statement, the UN Rapporteur for Human Rights and Counter-terrorism, Ben Emmerson, called on the US to answer questions regarding the secrecy of its drone operations. To many, the statement came as a shock as such a demand was not made on the international level in the past from the US, and coming as it did from the UN, a body supposedly favoring the US, surprised many. Emmerson has been vocal on questioning the legality of the drones and the global outrage resulting from the Predator strikes. Commenting on the issue, 20th August, he said:

"We can't make a decision on whether it is lawful or unlawful if we do not have the data. If they (the drone technology users) do not establish a mechanism (of internal investigation), it will be my recommendation that the UN should put the mechanisms in place through the Human Rights Council, the General Assembly and the Office of the High Commissioner."

Soon after taking over, Emmerson made sure that highlighting the illegal use of drones and its drastic consequences were among his top priorities. He is also in the process of preparing a comprehensive report for the next session of the UN Human Rights Council in March, where he will report on the spike in the use of drone technology by the Obama administration.

Primarily known as an accomplished lawyer in the United Kingdom, Emmerson is also working for the promotion of fair trials and compensation for innocent war victims. He is also trying to change the international narrative on terrorism and terrorists, where every war prisoner is tagged as a terrorist, with most of them not having the opportunity of a fair trial. But more importantly, his stance on drone attacks, and especially their rise in Pakistan, has started a serious debate in international circles over the morality and legality of the issue.

The recent pace of CIA-operated drone strikes increased in the month of August in Waziristan – Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) – Pakistan. In total, seven drone attacks took place in a month, the highest number in a single month for the current year. The first use of drone attacks was reported in a article in New York Times in 2008, and since then their use has been carried on unabated. A total of 32 drone strikes have hit FATA in 2012. To date, close to 340 drone strikes have killed more than 800 civilians and have caused approximately 3,300 casualties, which, for reasons of media prohibitions in the region, are also dubious as to whether the victims were militants or civilians.

In this context, blasting the drone programme, Mr. Emmerson said:

"Thousands of innocent people, including women and children, have been murdered in these indiscriminate attacks."

In March, the UN Human Rights Commissioner, Navi Pillay, also rejected drone use, as an instrument of human rights violations, stating:

“I see the indiscriminate killings and injuries of civilians in any circumstances as human rights violations.”

Not only do the drones violate a country's sovereignty but, also, most of the times they result in killing innocent civilians, mostly women and children. Hundreds of attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia have been carried out by the US, keeping in mind the fact that the aforementioned are independent states.

A common trend that is read, heard and witnessed by viewers around the world is that most Western media report or tag casualties in all these strikes as “suspected militants” with no confirmation of the victims' identities. In Emmerson's view, this phenomena leads to a basic rights violation where most of the strikes result in the deaths of innocent people.

A comprehensive report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) suggests that the USA owns the highest number of drones or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV's). Among all states in possession of drone technology, the USA tops the chart by a clear margin, boasting a fleet of 678 UAV's, with 18 different types and 14 of them classified as “heavy”. A big chunk of this fleet consists of the Predator UAV's that are primarily used for drone strikes against suspected militants in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen.

Emmerson is of the view that demands for fair investigation into the issue by Russia, China and Pakistan helped him in working closely with Christof Heyns, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary execution, to formulate an effective proposals on the issue. A man like Emmerson brings hope to the anti-war majority in the world. By locking horns with states such as the USA, he is providing a path for peace-loving states and a hope for an end to violent drone warfare. One can only hope that till the implementation of an effective transparent investigation mechanism, the issue remains on the top of the agenda at the UN. This may also be an opportunity for the UN to revive the international trust that it is losing slowly and gradually.

Mounting international pressure, Pakistan's recent stance and protest lodged against the attacks, and Emmerson's resolve can help end the drone war. And his words, uttered during an interview, exactly suggest what he aims for in his tenure:

“I am not suggesting in the duration of my mandate that I will change the world but I do have an opportunity to change the dialogue.”

The writer works as a research analyst, programme consultant and content editor at the Centre for Research and Security Studies, Islamabad, along with pursuing his Research Studies in Public Policy from Germany. He also own a news blog by the name of The Faultlines and can be reached at farooq@crss.pk

Notes:

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