

Rights Groups Question U.S. Drone Strikes

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This week, two human rights groups accused the United States of killing more civilians in drone strikes than American officials say. The groups say many of the attacks appeared to be illegal under international law.

Human Rights Watch investigated six drone strikes in Yemen since 2009. It found that at least 57 civilians died in the attacks. Letta Tayler studies terrorist acts and anti-terrorism efforts for the group.

“Two of the six cases that we examined in my report show that the U.S. indiscriminately killed civilians. This is a clear violation of international law.”

The report says some drone strikes violated the rules set by President Obama to justify such attacks. The president has said the unmanned aircraft can be used when responding to an immediate threat to the United States. He also said they can be used when there is no hope of capturing a targeted terrorist, and “near certainty” that civilians will not be harmed.

At the White House, Press Secretary Jay Carney rejected accusations that drone strikes violated international law.

“To the extent these reports claim that the U.S. has acted contrary to international law, we would strongly disagree. The administration has repeatedly emphasized the extraordinary care that we take to make sure counterterrorism actions are in accordance with all applicable law.”

Amnesty International examined nine American drone attacks in Pakistan. It says it found evidence that more than 30 civilians were killed in four of the strikes. A United Nations report has estimated that drone strikes in Pakistan killed 400 civilians over the past 10 years.

Both Amnesty and Human Rights Watch are calling for more congressional supervision of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Department.

The first American drone attack in Pakistan took place in 2004. Many observers believe there was a secret agreement in which Pakistan privately approved of drone strikes but publicly condemned them.

Pakistani officials say they are strongly opposed to the attacks. They condemn them as a violation of their country’s sovereignty – the right to be free from interference by another country. They also say the attacks are fueling militancy in Pakistan.

North Waziristan has long been considered a center for al-Qaida militants and the Haqqani network. That group has been blamed for some of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan. The United States has long pressured the Pakistani military to move against extremists in North Waziristan. However, some officials believe that state control has almost disappeared in the territory.

On Wednesday, President Obama and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met at the White House. They discussed cooperation in fighting terrorism and concerns about what the president called "senseless violence and extremism" in Pakistan. Afterward they spoke to reporters. Prime Minister Sharif said the two countries will continue to increase cooperation against terrorists. But he also called for no more drone attacks.

"Pakistan and the United States have a strong, ongoing counterterrorism cooperation. We have agreed to further strengthen this cooperation. I also brought up the issue of drones in our meeting, emphasizing the need for an end to such strikes."

And that's In the News, from VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember.