

Civil society statement on armed drones
UN General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament and International Security
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Delivered by Maria Pia Devoto, Sehlac Network

I am presenting a statement that has been endorsed by 44 civil society organisations from 14 countries, that believe there is a need to prevent and mitigate harm from the use of armed drones.

Attacks launched from drones have caused significant harm in communities since such tactics were first employed in 2001, including deaths, injuries, the destruction of homes and public infrastructure, as well as impacts on mental health.

The use of armed drones has often been characterised by a lack of transparency, accountability, and redress for victims, eroding democratic oversight and international scrutiny of the use of force. A growing number of UN member states, civil society organisations, and UN human rights experts and bodies have expressed deep concern at the complicity of third party states in unlawful activities, and the implications of some current practice for: upholding the rule of law; respecting human rights and international humanitarian law; and ensuring due process.

Drone technology has introduced specific capabilities for users, such as unprecedented capacities for surveillance and the ability to use lethal force across borders without physical risk to the attacker. Aspects of current practice in the use of armed drones have raised a key concern – that some states may be using this technology to facilitate an erosion of the boundaries that should constrain harm, protect communities, and limit the use of lethal force; and to facilitate an expansion of use of force practices normally associated with the conduct of hostilities.

Such actions amongst some actors should be rejected across the international community as a template for the use of force in the future. Armed drone technology is already proliferating amongst states and non-state armed actors, and even in domestic policing contexts. There is an urgency to act on this issue now.

We welcome the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs' 2015 study on armed aerial drones, as well as previous efforts to address and make recommendations on this issue at the Human Rights Council and in the UNGA's Third Committee.

We also welcome the attention that the European Parliament has paid to this issue in 2016 and previously, and the call to action for European states issued by the European Forum on Armed Drones, a network of civil society organisations, earlier this year.¹

We note the information recently released by the United States about certain aspects of its use of armed drones and other airstrikes, as well as the US President's Executive Order regarding US Policy on Pre- and Post-Strike Measures to Address Civilian Casualties in US Operations involving the Use of Force.

But, there are serious implications if the actions of some states in their use of armed drones are continued, accepted, or expanded, including in the context of inadequate export control frameworks. Greater international scrutiny regarding the use of these

¹ See <http://www.paxvoorvrede.nl/media/files/efad-call-to-action.pdf>

technologies, and agreement around them, is needed. As a first step, all states should disclose more information on their policies and, where relevant, practices—including clearly articulating a position on the humanitarian and legal issues presented by the use of armed drones.

In addition, all casualties of armed violence, including those of weapons launched from armed drones, should be publicly recorded and acknowledged. The rights of victims must be upheld and measures to investigate and respond to harm should be clear and public. Too often this has not been the case, despite continued advocacy from victims and others.

We call for greater attention to be given to the issue of armed drones in all relevant international forums, including at the First Committee.

States, in partnership with international organisations and civil society, should work to agree on the international action necessary to prevent and mitigate harm resulting from the use of armed drones both now and for the future. Practices that undermine the rule of law must be rejected.

Open and transparent collective action is vital to respond to both the harm currently being caused by the use of armed drones, and to the serious implications for peace and security in the future.

List of endorsing organisations:

Airwars, UK
Alliance of Baptists, US
Article 36, UK
Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), US
CorpWatch, US
Dar Al-Salaam Organisation (DASO), Yemen
Disciples Center for Public Witness, US
Disciples Peace Fellowship, US
Drone Campaign Network, UK
Drone Wars UK
Faith Voices Arkansas, US
Fredslaget, Norway
Human Rights Clinic, Columbia Law School, US
Human Rights Now, Japan
International Committee for Robot Arms Control (ICRAC), UK
Italian Coalition of Civil Rights and Freedom (CILD), Italy
Israeli Disarmament Movement, Israel
Just Foreign Policy, US
Medact, UK
Mwatana Organisation for Human Rights, Yemen
National Religious Campaign Against Torture, US
Nonviolence International, US
Omega Research Foundation, UK
On Earth Peace, US
Open Society Foundations, US
Pax Christi Flanders, Belgium
Pax Christi International, Belgium
PAX, Netherlands
Peace Action, US
Peace Movement Aotearoa, Aotearoa New Zealand
Pennsylvania Council of Churches, US
Philippine Campaign to Ban Landmines, Philippines
Remote Control Project, UK
Rete Italiana per il Disarmo (Italian Disarmament Network), Italy
Rights Watch, UK
Saferworld, UK
Scientists for Global Responsibility, UK
Sehlaq Network – Seguridad Humana en Latinoamérica y el Caribe, Argentina
Stop Bombing Public Places Campaign, Philippines
Sustainable Peace and Development Organization (SPADO), Pakistan
The Church of the Brethren, Office of Public Witness, US
Whistleblower & Source Protection Program (WHISPeR), US
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Switzerland
World Council of Churches – Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (WCC-CCIA), Switzerland

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