

NGO Statement on Armed Drones

Chair,

This statement is presented on behalf of 14 civil society organisations from across the world. Together, we are committed to protecting individuals and preventing and mitigating harm, including violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, resulting from the use of drones in domestic and international deployments of force.

2020 became the hallmark of what some refer to as “the second drone age”, with the targeted killing of the Iranian General Soleimani in Iraq by a US drone; the escalating drone war in Libya, referred to by the UN’s Humanitarian Coordinator as the “world’s largest theater for the use of drones”; and the rapid speed of drone use in Syria, Yemen, and recently in the disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh.

Following more than a decade of the use of drones for remote violence under unclear legal justifications that risk undermining existing international humanitarian and human rights laws, we are also currently witnessing a propagation of States deploying drones in support of cross-border attacks and support operations of armed groups abroad.

Due to the absence of risk to their own pilots, armed drones have become the latest deadly foreign policy tool to exert influence abroad. The misleading “risk-free” temptation of deploying armed drones can jeopardize regional security and contribute to an escalation of violence.

Another dangerous development is the rapid proliferation of technologies that now allow non-state actors to deploy deadly drones over long distances and target vital economic and civilian infrastructure. Attacks with weaponized commercial drones, often assembled with parts and components that are readily available, have become commonplace in the wars in Yemen, as we witnessed last year with the strikes against refineries in Saudi Arabia, as well as in ongoing strikes against oil infrastructure in Syria and civilian targets in Libya.

Novel technology continues to create new possibilities for use by armed forces, but these developments should also go hand-in-hand with deliberations on the implications of how new technologies are shaping warfare and what is needed to control their development, production, proliferation, and use in order to uphold international legal principles and protect people from violence.

This year, clear recommendations regarding armed drone use and proliferation were included by the UN Secretary-General in his annual report on the Protection of Civilians and by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions in her 2020 report on targeted killings with armed drones. Such recommendations included a call for more regular reporting on drone use to relevant UN bodies, such as the Human Rights Council, and urging UN Member States to establish a transparent multilateral process for the development of robust standards for the use of drones. Alternatively, in absence of the latter, it was recommended that like-minded States should establish a group of experts to develop such standards as part of a time-bound forum for States, academics, and civil society to identify and strengthen legal norms and accountability mechanisms.

We strongly encourage States who seek to develop such multilateral discussions on strong norms and standards on the use of lethal violence with drones to actively explore opportunities for establishing a forum where all aspects of drone development, production, export, and use in relation to armed conflict and civilian harm can be addressed.

We urge Member States not to wait, but to act now to protect people and communities in accordance with international law, as ever-rapidly developing new advancements in technology and proliferation are already outpacing international capacities to constrain drone use. Curbing and containing such remote-controlled violence is possible, but political will is needed, and States must act before it is too late.

SIGNATORIES:

Action on Armed Violence (AOAV)

APP Argentina

Article 36

Campaña Colombiana Contra Minas

Drone Wars UK

European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR)

International Committee on Robotic Arms Control

Latin America and Caribbean Human Security Network (SEHLAC)

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