

ROBOT WARS

SCHNEWS ASKS, DRONES? ARE UAV-ING A LAUGH?

Want to keep fighting an unwinnable war while keeping down the home team casualty figures? You need remote-control warfare. Drones or UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) are increasingly becoming the face of modern imperial war. Remotely piloted Predator, Reaper and now Avenger drones mean that the world's great powers can unleash destruction from afar without risking a single soldier's life.

Following a series of well documented massacres of Afghan civilians by US bombers, former general McCrystal more or less banned the use of airstrikes in the Afghan campaign, with exception of UAV drones. The result, a massive increase in the number of combat drones (and massacres by combat drones).

This weekend saw four CIA drone strikes in Pakistan with a death toll estimated to be around 35. This has brought the number of drone strikes in Pakistan since Nobel Peace Prize winning President Barack Obama came to power to 100. The Guardian reports that British Reapers have been used 97 times to launch attacks in Afghanistan since 2008. Meanwhile, according to Pakistani sources, they have also killed some 700+ civilians. This is 50 civilians for every militant killed, a hit rate of 2 percent.

The 'big three' of the War on Terror (US, Britain and Israel) are the driving forces behind the rise of the remote control assassins and although the Britain-Israel arms trade has dropped slightly following the attacks on Gaza (see SchNEWS 661) the big winner has been joint UK-Israeli UAV research.

Back in 2005 the UK government awarded a \$500 million contract to UAV Tactical Systems Ltd - a partnership of Thales UK (British arm of the massive French arms company) and Israel's Elbit. The Brits are developing their own 'Watchkeeper' based on the Israeli Hermes drone. The Watchkeeper had its maiden flight in April of this year. In the meantime, the UK has to make do with Israeli UAVs that it hires by the hour. To date the UK has totted up 30,000 hours of use over Afghanistan.

Keen to put a bit of positive spin on the long-distance killers, M.O.D spokesman Lt Cdr Gerry Corbett said, "The public perception is either: they're spying on us; they're shooting at us; or they're not safe. We are trying to get rid of the phrase UAV. They are aircraft and they are piloted, albeit remotely."

Although pilotless drone aircraft were used in the first Iraq War (and Israelis used drones against Lebanon and Syria as early as 1982),

armed unmanned drones were first used in the Balkans in 1995, and were used for assassinations in Afghanistan in 2000. Afghanistan, the poorest country in Asia, has been subjected to attacks from machines inspired by Arnie films. The British satellite system which enables Nevada based RAF pilots to fly the skies over the 'Stan is even called Skynet - just what we need, heavily armed geeks.

Unveiled three weeks ago was BAE's contribution, the Taranis. Named after a Celtic Thunder God (Yep this is the real World of Warcraft) the Taranis is designed to go one step beyond remote control. This baby is intended to operate on autonomous 'hunter-killer' missions. To make the aircraft 'more stealthy' i.e. invisible to radar, the drone's bombs and missiles are carried internally. A small protest greeted it's unveiling with a banner saying "The only good drone is a Vuvuzuela".

Fourteen U.S. activists are facing charges after trespassing on an airbase used for piloting the drones. The activists entered the base's gates and refused to leave in protest against Creech Air Force Base's role as the little-known headquarters for U.S. military operations involving unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, over Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. They are awaiting trial. "It's just something that has clearly made killing so much easier," said Iowa-based activist Brian Terrell, one of the so-called Creech 14 now facing charges. "Removing a combatant from the battlefield has a certain coldness, a weirdness about it. The idea that someone is sitting at a console at Creech and shooting missiles at people half a world away is very spooky."

Because of this advanced weapons system, officials are able to claim that they have killed 14 top Al Qaeda leaders, such as Ilas Kashmir (supposed leader of Al Qaeda's Lakshar al-Zil - which translates as the 'The Shadow Army') and Beitullah Meshud (Pakistani Taliban leader). Meshud's position was quickly filled by his brother, Hakimullah, and its not certain whether or not Lakshar al-Zil has even ever existed. Ilas Kashmiri rather spoiled things by turning up alive in an interview a month later. Meanwhile civilian casualties mount.

The US has two separate fleets of UAVs- one run by the Airforce and one run by the CIA. While the airforce programme is run according to the usual (lax) rules of war, the CIA's parallel programme is entirely secret, and limited by neither borders nor congressional oversight.

Even the well publicised spat between Tur-



key and Israel wasn't enough to get in the way of Turkey hiring Israeli trainers to help Turkish drone operators target Kurdish rebels - "Let them drown in their own blood" as the Turkish pm tactfully put it recently.

With remarkably little public debate, drones have become the legacy weapon of the War on Terror. Drone strikes have allowed military action in countries the US is not officially at war with - notably in Pakistan, but also against perceived enemies in Yemen and Somalia. Targeted killing has become an official part of US foreign policy.

President Obama has dramatically increased the number of drone strikes, exceeding Bush's tally. Obama's first two uses of drones killed 80 at a wedding party. That was three days into his presidency. He's even joked about setting Predator drones on prospective suitors of his daughters

US Department of Defense documents state that by 2015 they would like to see drones accounting for one third of missions flown by the US airforce. To army planners drones seem like a dream come true - low cost (\$ 4million for a Reaper versus \$17 million for an F16) and with almost no risk to US personnel- a boon to politicians concerned that dead troops mean unpopular wars.

*The website, <http://dronewarsuk.wordpress.com/> is regularly updated with info about UAV warfare, with an emphasis on British involvement.

CRAP ARREST OF THE WEEK

For taking the peace...

After three hours of fence-jumping fun and bailiff dodging shenanigans at the former site of Democracy Village (see article overleaf), tetchy coppers finally lost their temper and nicked one of the mischief makers on charges of "failure to comply with a court order". After being dragged away for doing nothing more than sitting on the grass brandishing a Peace flag he was taken to the cop shop. With some of that legendary police ironic wit, the charges were later changed to breach of the er, peace...



GREECE: FUEL ON THE FIRE

Nationwide strikes as workers oppose austerity measures

Greece has been left paralysed by strikes as fuel tanker drivers, air traffic controllers and parliamentary workers oppose austerity measures.

The fuel tanker drivers strike has had a massive impact during the four days it has been running. Stores shrunk so rapidly that within 24hrs of the strike, fuel reserves were almost exhausted and there were huge queues at petrol stations. On Tuesday (27th), the drivers announced a continuation of their strike, even though 80% of petrol stations across the country have shut due to lack of fuel and station owners have withdrawn their support. Fuel tanker drivers have now proposed an indefinite strike.

On Wednesday (28th), the PASOK government were forced to resort to emergency civil conscription powers, issuing an order that, in theory, means that every striking lorry driver will receive a personal letter calling them back to work; disobeying this could result in imprisonment. This political conscription also allows the army to intervene and to replace the striking drivers in their duties, paving the way for the military to step in to distribute petrol. The truck drivers response has been defiant: after the announcement of civil conscription drivers pulled their trucks to blockade the oil refineries of Thessaloniki and Aspropyrgos (Athens). A group of striking lorry drivers

clashed with the police outside the Ministry of Transport in Athens.

The drivers are far from alone in taking action. A two day strike by air traffic controllers was ruled caused long delays in Greek airports and left thousands of tourists stranded.

These events have devastated the already ailing tourist industry during the peak of summer season. Tourism accounts for 25% of the country's national economy and had been experiencing significantly lower numbers of tourists and monetary losses even before these latest developments. The hiring of academic staff has been reduced by 50%, with 7,000 job replacements lost. At the same time, the IMF committee is performing another general inspection of the Greek economy with rumours about further measures to be introduced by September that will slash private sector wages by 20%.

In recent weeks even parliament workers have been striking, surely causing immense joy to the Government - without the staff to vote, passing new laws will be a bit of a struggle. However, as dissatisfied as the general public are with government measures, they are reaching similar levels of discontent with the continuing waves of strikes as both are causing crippling repercussions to Plato's old stomping ground. Something has to give one way or the other.

IAN TOMLINSON PROTESTS

Protesters will today descend on the Office of Department of Public Prosecution at 12 noon to demonstrate against the decision to let Ian Tomlinson's killer off scot free (see SchNEWS 732). After the decision was announced the Justice for Ian Tomlinson campaign and the United Campaign Against Police Violence picketed New Scotland Yard. They were joined by relatives of Jean Claude de Menezes - murdered by police five years ago to the day.

*See www.iantomlinsonfamilycampaign.org.uk and www.inquest.org.uk

EARTH FIRST! GATHERING

The Earth First! Summer Gathering will be set up this weekend ready for the go next Wednesday. There'll be five days of workshops, ecological direct action planning, skill sharing and networking. It will run from 4-9th August in Derbyshire. Entrance is £20-30 according to what you can afford. For more information or to get involved email summergathering@earthfirst.org.uk

RADICAL MEDIA ROUNDUP

*A new radical newsletter is hitting the virtual streets of Bristol. The Autonomist will combine coverage of local campaigns with listings for local groups, spaces and upcoming events. With details of a new squatted social centre opening, Issue 1 is available now online at www.bristolautonomist.blogspot.com

*Just Do It is a film following environmental activists as they take on the forces of capitalism and ecological destruction through civil disobedience. Relying on a volunteer production team and paid for by crowd-funding, the film will be released as a free to distribute Creative Commons project early next year. To check out the trailer or find out how to get involved in the project see www.just-do-it.org.uk

...and finally...

The Galactic Empire must've been caught up in the financial crisis and fallen on hard times. Darth Vader, trying to raise funds for a new Death Star perhaps, was caught on surveillance camera robbing a bank in New Your State.

Complete with mask, cape and er gun (doh, forgotten to charge the lightsabre again!), he burst into the bank and announced his intentions.

Although some customers were sniggering in disbelief, one would-be jedi hero tried to tackle the dark Lord of the Sith, but he was quickly subdued and can be seen cowering in the background of the CCTV tape, presumably quietly choking and rasping for air in a British accent.

Vader then appeared at the counter and presumably ordered the teller to hand over the lucre or feel his wrath.

Cops will surely be trying to harness the full power of the force in attempts to trace him before he strikes (back) again.

Disclaimer

SchNEWS warns all readers, it's not a bird, it's not a plane, it's heavily armed killer robot. Honest.

EDO: LEND ME YOUR SMEARS

After the historic victory of the EDO Decommissioners earlier this month (see SchNEWS 729), the judge in the case, George Bathurst-Norman, has become the target of a concerted smear campaign by a number of right-wing columnists. The Zionist Federation and the Board of Deputies of British Jews have both claimed that his summing up of the case was 'anti-semitic'.

As a result of organised lobbying by Zionist groups, the Office of Judicial Complaints (OJC) has opened an investigation into his handling of the case. The inquiry is at an early stage and it's likely the already retired judge will receive nothing more than a ticking off, but the news has been spread via news outlets, like the Daily Mail, who were remarkably uninterested in the original verdict.

SchNEWS couldn't care less what happens to Bathurst-Norman, who in his day was a fearsome hander down of harsh sentences - he once sent down Paul Kelleher for three months for knocking the head off a statue of Maggie Thatcher (see SchNEWS 394). But the fact is that this smear campaign is really aimed at the defendants and anyone else who wants to run a similar defence.

Smash EDO told SchNEWS "The charge of anti-semitism is a cynical attempt to undermine the achievement of the Decommissioners. There is nothing anti-semitic in putting evidence of Israeli war crimes to a jury."

Helpfully the Jewish Chronicle has stuck up the full transcript of the summing up here for you to make up your own mind. www.hejc.com/35771/judge-bathurst-norman-full-summing

ROSSPORT: NOT BORED YET

The Rosspport anti-shell actions continue, with the focus on the Sruwaddacon estuary - the special conservation site Shell intend to destroy by building a tunnel right through the middle. This is all part of their revised plan for bringing in gas from the newly developed Corribos gas fields off the west coast of Ireland.

The Beat the Boreholes campaign crew (SchNEWS 730) have been making a constant nuisance of themselves. This week saw more activists and members of the local community taking walks through the site - to enjoy its pleasures one last time before it is industrialised, presumably - whilst more kayakers have been taking to the high seas. Eight boats were swiftly confronted by around 15 security boats, although no death threats were issued this time (see SchNEWS 731).

Anyone willing to contribute or act as a legal / human rights observer is welcome as Beat the Boreholes continues. They're certainly not relying on next month's five-week public hearing, ostensibly to consider the environmental impact of the latest incarnation of the plan, and definitely not an exercise in greenwash rubber-stamping, but then again - yer never know!

*For a great background summary of 'the story so far' - including dodgy deals, a decade of delays, skullduggery and the shady 'Bolivian connection' - see www.shelltosea.com/content/battle-rages-ireland-over-off-shore-drilling

PARTY & PROTEST

For events listings updated weekly see www.schnews.org.uk/pap

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