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ISLAMABAD: In what can only be described as a gross violation of the Geneva Convention, the CIA-sponsored drone campaign in Pakistan has killed dozens of innocent civilians involved in either rescuing injured victims, or partaking in funerals.

According to a report published by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism with the Sunday Times, between 282 and 535 civilians, including 60 minors, have been credibly reported as killed as a result of drone strikes since US President Barack Obama took office three years ago.

"A three months investigation including eye witness reports has found evidence that at least 50 civilians were killed in follow-up strikes when they had gone to help victims," affirmed the report. It went on to state that "More than 20 civilians have also been attacked in deliberate strikes on funerals and mourners."

Speaking publicly for the first time on the controversial CIA drone strikes, Obama claimed last week they were used strictly to target terrorists. However the new report counters this claim, with international law specialists fiercely positing that the strikes amount to little more than state-sanctioned extra-judicial executions, and going on to question just how the US government would react if another state such as China or Russia started taking similar "justified" action against those they declared enemies.

It has been reported that when the US attacks militants in Pakistan, the Taliban seals off the site and retrieves the dead. But an examination of thousands of credible reports relating to CIA drone strikes also showed frequent references to civilian rescuers. Mosques often exhort villagers to come forward and help, for example "particularly following fatal attacks that mistakenly kill civilians."

The upsurge in Washington's unmanned war has been so dramatic that the US now has 7,000 drones in operation, with 12,000 more on the ground, while not a single new manned combat aircraft is under research or development at any western aerospace company.

Noted expert on international law Ahmer Bilal Sufi told The News that the American administration will never be able to fully justify these brutal and illegal attacks carried out by technologically sophisticated and surgically precise killer robots since the "self-defense" theory holds little water in the eyes of the legal experts.

"The US cannot carry out drone attacks in the Pakistani areas on the basis of self-defense because Pakistani forces had not attacked US targets, and if terrorist attacks are conducted by non-state actors against the US forces then this does not permit a violation of international air space," he said.

He went on to argue that the statement issued by the foreign office a few days ago indicated that Pakistan too views drone attacks as a clear violation of its sovereignty, adding "The statement clearly stated that drone attacks are unacceptable." According to the South Asia Portal some 2,101 people have so far been killed in 217 drone attacks in the Pakistani since 2005.

A UN investigator on extra-judicial killings, Philip Alston, in his 29-page report has already raised concerns over these drone strikes: "In a situation in which there is no disclosure of who has been killed, for what reason, and whether innocent civilians have died, the legal principle of international accountability is, by definition, comprehensively violated," wrote Alston.

PML-N Senator and legal practitioner Syed Zafar Ali Shah told The News" that the US certainly violates the sovereignty of Pakistan by carrying out drone attacks on its territory but in response "we only do lip-service by condemning these attacks with our statements."

He went on to reiterate that no sovereign state can possibly stand these kinds of attacks, and that the Pakistani government in coordination with the international community should raise its legitimate objections on a more global platform.

INP adds from Washington: The report by the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism has confirmed that at least 50 civilians had been killed in follow-up strikes after they rushed to help those hit by a drone-fired missile. The bureau counted more than 20 other civilians killed in strikes on funerals. The findings were published on the bureau's website and in The Sunday Times of London.