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Despite anti-drone verdict, we are 'all one family'

John Dear | Feb. 1, 2011 On the Road to Peace

On Thursday, thirteen of us stood in a Las Vegas courtroom to hear the verdict for a 2009 act of civil disobedience we undertook at Creech Air Force Base, headquarters of the U.S. military?s automated attack drone operations.

Last September, Judge William Jansen of the Las Vegas Justice Court had dramatically announced that he would need at least three months to ?think? about the case. After telling us how ?nice? it was to see us, Jansen presented each of us with a twenty page legal ruling explaining why he found us guilty.

?You argued a defense of necessity,? Jansen said. ?when an inherent danger is present and immediate action must be taken, such as breaking a no-trespassing law to uphold a higher law and save life. In this case, no inherent danger was present, and so I find you guilty.?

Guilty! My friends and I have tried every legal means possible to stop our government from its terrorist drone bombing attacks on civilians in Afghanistan, and so we journeyed to the drone headquarters at Creech on Holy Thursday 2009 to kneel in prayer and beg for an end to the bombings.

And this nonviolent intervention is determined to be criminal -- not the regular drone bombing attacks on children in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

For *NCR*?s news story on the Creech 14 verdict, see:**Drone protesters convicted of trespassing** **[1]**.

I expected this ruling, but it was sad nonetheless. The judge missed a great opportunity to take a stand for justice and peace, to do the right thing, to help end terrorism. Instead, he sided with the war machine. Worse, he dismissed the loss of life caused by our drone attacks.

"It does not matter that civilians are being killed by our drones," he said in effect. His ruling indicated that some lives are not worth as much as others.

Before Jansen sentenced us, we each spoke briefly about our action and why we crossed the line. This testimony was the best, most moving part of our ordeal, so I thought I would share excerpts from my co-defendants remarks.

Brian Terrell of the Catholic Worker told the judge that the evil work of Creech Air Force Base does involve immediate, present danger -- to the children and people of Afghanistan.

Terrell cited a recent interview with a young drone operator who sits in front of a computer screen at Creech.

?The war is 7,000 miles away and the war is 18 inches away,? the Air Force operator said.

?7,000 miles, the distance from Creech to Afghanistan,? Terrell explained. ?Eighteen inches, the distance from his face to the screen. This distance is an illusion. And it?s a very dangerous illusion. The purpose behind our action was to dispel that illusion because it is very close and the danger we were addressing was and is

imminent.?

Brian should know. He and Kathy Kelly were just back from a three week trip to Afghanistan where they met victims of U.S. drone attacks.

?In Afghanistan, I met a family displaced by a drone attack in the Helmand Province,? Kelly told the judge. ?One man showed me the photos of his children's bloodied corpses. The drone attack killed his spouse and his five children. In the Charahi Qambar refugee camp, I sat next to Juma Gul, a nine-year-old girl whose arm was amputated by the same drone attack. She was punished horribly even though she committed no crime. We want to be in solidarity with her.

?It's criminal for the U.S. to spend 2 billion dollars per week for war in Afghanistan that maims, kills and displaces innocent civilians who've meant us no harm,? Kelly said.

Sr. Megan Rice said: ?I deplore the high tech technology used for mass killing which destroys and pollutes this sacred planet. I had to enter the base in order to obey higher orders. I have listened to the voice of the victims of drone warfare. These weapons are aptly named drones, predators, reapers.?

Libby Pappalardo said: ?We each have a responsibility to work for justice and to act in defense of human life. The use of drones has increased hatred and violence in our world. I have tried to work through the system, but it isn?t enough. This is an emergency situation. Our country is worse off because of the violence of war and militarism. It?s necessary to take this next step. I will continue to struggle for human rights and nonviolence so that all the world?s children can feel safe and embraced by peace and hope.?

Eve Tetaz said: ?I went to Creech to express my deep sorrow and outrage over the fact that my country was engaged in what I believe were acts of terrorism in the use of drones against my brothers and sisters. I cannot remain silent. I think of Moses? words: ?I set before you this day life and death, good and evil. Therefore, choose life that you and your family may live.?

?It is my prayer that you will be with us in speaking this truth to justice, that one day our nation will lead the world in the attempt to turn swords into plowshares and learn war no more so that the God of peace, mercy, justice and compassion will bring about law and justice. I invite you and all those who are present in the court to join us.?

Dennis DuVall said: ?As a veteran, I care about our guys over there. Every time there?s a drone strike, most of the victims are innocent women and children and old men like me. The younger men are considered militants. Each attack results in revenge attacks.?

?Last Spring I was in New York City during the nuclear disarmament march in Times Square when a car bomb was almost detonated. It?s ironic that I was protesting drone warfare at Creech AFB where they?re directing drone attacks and a year later I was almost an unwitting victim of a revenge car bomb attempt in Times Square. The young man who built the bomb, Faisal Shazad, said he was motivated by drone attacks against Pakistan. There is a greater harm. If this isn?t necessity, what the hell is? We cannot run from the consequences of our drone air war 7000 miles away. Eventually, it?s going to come home to us. We?re going to be the victims.?

Brad Lyttle said: ?We are attacking people in an Islamic country. We are shooting missiles and killing them in an arbitrary manner. It is generating great hatred, and these people have the means to access weapons to cause us tremendous harm. We need to establish peaceful, just ways to resolve disputes. This is the message I would like to have people examine and think about. We have to develop non-military means for achieving justice and therefore peace.?

Mariah Klusmire said: ?I?ve been hearing about the Afghan youth peace volunteers who work for peace and nonviolence in their land. As long as they?re working for peace in their country, I will too, and no punishment can stop me from working for peace.?

Jesuit Fr. Steve Kelly said: ?Through our presence, we were trying to make the imminent danger posed by drone warfare less remote. Our presence there was making the connection that would otherwise seem remote. We weren?t there to do civil disobedience. We were there to make an intervention. Our intention was lawful. I?m disappointed and saddened that you came to the wrong conclusion.?

Judy Homanich said: ?As a follower of Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I take seriously his second commandment, ?Love your neighbor as yourself. As the mother of two wonderful children -- my precious daughter, Sarah, who is just starting her adult life and my gone but not forgotten son, David, whose faith, courage and compassion continue to inspire me -- I prayerfully acted in solidarity with all mothers, daughters, wives and sisters here and around the world who suffer loss due to war.

?My son David?s death, at age 21, was due to cancer not war, but I understand the heart-wrenching, life-changing pain of losing a child, a loved one. The U.S. government kills countless innocents in drone attacks and calls it collateral damage.?

?President Obama should heed his own words, spoken in October, 2010, while in India,? Homanich continued. ?He said nothing ever justifies the slaughter of innocent civilians. But the U.S. drone attacks continue. This criminal long distance killing makes us all less human and less safe. I have a duty to bear witness against this killing and I will continue to do so.?

Franciscan Fr. Jerry Zawada said: ?We are all one family. The huge numbers of innocent people being killed by drones is something I have to stand up against. We think of people on the other side of the border or the ocean as being different from ourselves. They?re not. That?s my family and your family too. We are one family. We have to take risks for one another.?

For my two cents, I named these drones as illegal, immoral, and impractical, and said they are bad for us politically, economically, socially and spiritually. I said that crossing the line onto Creech was an act of prayer for an end to these terrorist drones, and for an end to war itself -- for new nonviolent ways to resolve conflict.

We were obeying a higher law, taking our case to a Higher Power.

In the end, the judge sentenced us to time served. We didn?t go to jail and, meanwhile, our drones continue to drop bombs.

A new report says unauthorized U.S. drone strikes last year claimed nearly 1,200 lives. According to Pakistani sources, our drone attacks kill almost 50 civilians for every ?militant? we target.

Together, through our action and our courtroom testimony, we argued that we can do better than drop bombs through these drone machines. As we left, we pledged to continue to speak out against the drones, to try to wake one another up about the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to stir the embers of the peace movement to speak out and take action for a new world of nonviolence.

We give thanks for the opportunity to witness to peace, and we go forward determined to promote peace with everyone.

As Father Jerry said, we are all one family.

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To hear a new podcast interview with John Dear, go to www.jesusradicals.com. On Tomorrow, John will speak on ?Dr. King and Creative Nonviolence? at the Univ. of Rhode Island in Kingston. Later this month he will give a keynote speech at the annual Sabeel Conference in Bethlehem, Palestine/Israel (see: www.sabeel.org). His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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