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On drones and divestment

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

NCR Today

Medea Benjamin is a petite woman with enormous courage and energy. She co-founded the California-based human rights organization Global Exchange and the women's peace group Code Pink. She has just written a book on drones, a task that inspired her to co-host a drone summit in Washington, D.C., last weekend.

The CIA and US Joint Special Command have been carrying out drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia since 2004. Few Americans know about the consequences of this policy. In Pakistan alone, there have been 300 strikes, which, by some estimates, have killed up to 2,000 civilians.

On Monday, counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan gave a speech on drones at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. It was the first time a member of the Obama administration had spoken publicly on US use of drones, which Brennan once described as weapons of "exceptional proficiency" and "precision." Benjamin, a woman with convictions and a great deal of information, interrupted to give some damning details:

In an essay posted on Common Dreams and Mondoweiss, Benjamin explains why she spoke out during Monday's event at the Wilson Center:

I had just co-organized a Drone Summit over the weekend, where Pakistani lawyer Shahzad Akbar told us heart-wrenching stories about the hundreds of innocent victims of our drone attacks. We saw horrific photos of people whose bodies were blown apart by Hellfire missiles, with only a hand or a slab of flesh remaining. We saw poor children on the receiving end of our attacks -- maimed for life, with no legs, no eyes, no future. And for all these innocents, there was no apology, no

compensation, not even an acknowledgement of their losses. Nothing.

The U.S. government refuses to disclose who has been killed, for what reason, and with what collateral consequences. It deems the entire world a war zone, where it can operate at will, beyond the confines of international law

So there I was at the Wilson Center, listening to Brennan describe our policies as ethical, "wise," and in compliance with international law. He spoke as if the only people we kill with our drone strikes are militants bent on killing Americans. "It is unfortunate that to save innocent lives we are sometimes obliged to take lives -- the lives of terrorists who seek to murder our fellow citizens." The only mention of taking innocent lives referred to Al Qaeda. "Al Qaeda's killing of innocent civilians, mostly Muslim men, women and children, has badly tarnished its image and appeal in the eyes of Muslims around the world." This is true, but the same must be said of U.S. policies that fuel anti-American sentiments in the eyes of Muslims around the world.

Meanwhile, down in Tampa, Fla., this week, the United Methodist General Conference fell short of voting in favor of a resolution to divest from three companies -- Motorola, Hewlett Packard and Caterpillar -- that help sustain the Israeli occupation but called for boycotting all Israeli companies "operating in the occupied Palestine Territories."

While some advocates of Palestinian rights were disappointed in the Methodist vote, the Palestinian BDS (Boycott Divestment Sanctions) National Committee interpreted events in Tampa as an occasion to hope and persevere. An excerpt from their statement reads:

"The General Conference, taking place this year in Tampa, FL, meets every four years and is the only entity that speaks for The United Methodist Church. The process and international debates leading to the vote on this divestment resolution mark a milestone in the persistent efforts of Christians around the world and Methodists in particular to bring concrete meaning to a long-standing ethical Church position in support of ending Israel's occupation and human rights violations. The setback notwithstanding, this debate over how best to hold Israel accountable for human rights violations is largely viewed as ushering in a new phase in faith groups' activism for Palestinian rights reminiscent of similar measures that eventually contributed to dismantling South African apartheid."

Four annual (regional) Methodists conferences have already adopted resolutions calling for divestment from companies that sustain the Israeli occupation.

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