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Updated: As we go on trial today for peace witness, join us in prayer

John Dear | Sep. 14, 2010 On the Road to Peace

Editor's Note: Read about the trial here: Drones on trial, and a judge listens [1]

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Today, September 14th, fourteen of us -- including four priests -- stand trial in the state courthouse in Las Vegas, Nev. on charges of criminal trespassing. The government seeks to jail us for walking onto Creech Air Force Base on Holy Thursday last April.

We walked onto the base -- which is about an hour northwest of Las Vegas -- with nothing but a prayer and a call for an end of the U.S. drone fighter bomber program, which is headquartered there. We went to Creech in a spirit of gentleness, but also of protest. It?s time for the U.S. to end its killing of our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq.

Needless to say, our call -- and the gift we offered of a letter, roses and pizza -- were rejected. The police arrested us and put us in handcuffs. Then they hauled us to Las Vegas and booked and tossed us for the night in to the local jail. The next day -- Good Friday -- they set us free. But now the government is intent on pressing full charges, hoping to put an end to this anti-drone movement. A nation whose foundation is militarism and war cannot brook dissenters from a different moral order.

It?s an old story. Punish those who nonviolently speak out for justice and peace. Incarcerate those who stand up or sit in. Perhaps that will snuff out the fires of the peace movement.

But thank God, as Dr. King once said, truth crushed to earth always rises. Active nonviolence spreads like a contagion. Love and truth break through like blades of grass through cracked pavement. Hidden movements begin to flourish -- movements of transformation, disarmament and healing.

I do not relish getting arrested, standing trial or facing jail. But in a world of war, nuclear weapons, extreme poverty, corporate greed, executions, global warming and empire, the courtroom must be faced -- just as these drones need to be addressed. ?Social change does not come about in the classroom or the pulpit,? Gandhi once said. ?It comes about by standing in the courts, in jails and sometimes on the gallows.?

Our drones go on bombing and killing innocent people in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. So we went to Creech, walked on to the base and knelt down in prayer. And now we go to court in a spirit of creative nonviolence and even in court we?ll denounce these inhuman death machines and call for their abolition. We go because we have no choice.

We will begin the day today with a rally and march to the courthouse. In court, we intend to argue that, under international law, we are obliged to oppose these ?Unmanned Aerial Vehicles? -- the official name for the drones. We also plan to show the court that by entering the base we were enacting our first amendment right to assemble peaceably for redress of grievances.

One of the first issues before the court will be our request to include former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, Center for Constitutional Rights legal director Bill Quigley, and retired U.S. Army Colonel Ann Wright -- a former U.S. diplomat posted in Afghanistan -- as expert witnesses. Clark will demonstrate that ?usage of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles based at Creech Air Force Base to kill ?high value targets? constitutes extrajudicial executions and fails to afford all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.?

?When we read in the paper about these robotic attacks we are usually told where the drone strike took place and how many militants were killed,? co-defendant Kathy Kelly wrote the other day.

?But then it often turns out that the victims were simply local people, not militants in any sense. The blood and the smell of charred bodies are realities on the ground, but are simply small images on a screen in front of the drone operator on the air force base. I believe the American people need to know what we are doing, and understand why the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan cannot see us as part of the solution. This is why I want to focus attention on the drones, and why I am willing to appear here in the courtroom.

?Since I am aware of what really happens when a drone attacks, I want to step forward to let the facts be known. The U.S. claims to be in Pakistan and Afghanistan because we want to help the people and deliver them from extremists, but this is not what is happening. The drone attacks have killed hundreds of people during this past year, and few of them militants, most of them simple people. The horror of these attacks ensures that the U.S. appears to be a menacing country. ?The hatred is rising,? Safdar Dawar, a Pakistani journalist told us in May of 2010. ?It?s a big problem,? he continued, ?and we can?t understand why people in your country don?t know more about the drone usage. Where is your democracy???

The other co-defendants for the action at Creech Air Force Base are: Dennis DuVall; Renee Espeland; Judy Homanich; Jesuit Fr. Steve Kelly; Mariah Klusmire; Brad Lyttle; Libby Pappalardo; Society of the Holy Child Jesus Sr. Megan Rice; Brian Terrell; Eve Tetaz; Franciscan Fr. Louie Vitale; and Franciscan Fr. Jerry Zawada.

Vitale was recently released after six months in prison for protesting the ?School of the Americas? in Fort Benning, Ga., now formally known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

Kelly was informed last week that the federal government has placed felony charges against him and four other activists for a plowshares disarmament action at the Trident submarine base near Seattle, Wash. last November. He and the others face ten years in prison.

Another co-defendant has an upcoming trial for protesting weapons testing at Vandenberg Air Force Base near Santa Barbara, Calif.

As P.W. Singer writes in *Wired for War: the Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* *[2]*, unmanned aerial vehicles like the MQ-9 Reaper drone [3] are used by the Pentagon not only for surveillance -- but to kill and blow up buildings in Iraq and Afghanistan. Defying international law, the CIA uses the Reaper to assassinate and blow up buildings in Pakistan. The Pentagon and CIA adore these new weapons. With no pilot or crew, no U.S. military officers can be injured or killed. They can be directed by young officers thousands of miles away. Forty other nations are racing to develop similar drone programs.

Welcome to the future.

On the day of our action drones flew low in front of us for hours. It was an astonishing sight to see these black predators hovering over the beautiful Nevada desert. What terror must they invoke as they fly over the villages of the helpless poor in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq?

The drones are the sons of nuclear weapons. They offer a bleak future -- a sky full of black death, hovering over the earth. Our modest gesture -- prayer, roses, and of course, pizza -- advocated another future, a future of peace without drones or nuclear weapons.

If the judge allows our great friends to offer expert testimony we will hear in detail what these drones are doing -- and how they violate international law and the Nuremberg Principles [4]. But I?m also concerned with what they are doing to us. Since violence is a downward spiral their unimaginable destruction will certainly come back upon us like a boomerang. One day, I fear, drones will fly over our own country.

More, they signal our spiritual death -- the loss of our humanity. The children of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq do not threaten us; it?s this self-destructive spirit of war within and among us which is killing us. We need to repent of these weapons and discover a new spirit of love and compassion within us.

Being hauled into court, Jesus taught, is our chance to give witness. If I?m able to take the stand I?ll testify that I went to Creech Air Force Base because I?m a follower of the nonviolent Jesus who went to Jerusalem and confronted his empire. My friends and I were trying to do the same.

I?ll cite the nonviolent Jesus as my expert.

?Love your enemies that you will be sons and daughters of the God who lets the sun shine on the good and the bad and allows the rain to fall on the just and the unjust,? Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

If we continue to kill our enemies and rain bombs down upon them, I?ll say, we are not sons and daughters of the God of universal love. We are, rather, sons and daughters of the false gods of death. I will then urge the judge to dismiss the charges or find us not guilty and join our campaign to rid the planet of these weapons, that we might be peacemakers -- sons and daughters of the God of universal love and peace.

After that I?ll invite the judge to join us for pizza. Why not? We live eternally in hope.

Alas, such talk will probably not be allowed. In that case, our witness will be our nonviolent presence -- the love in our hearts for unseen sisters and brothers in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan.

And the prayer that rises among us, first at Creech, and now in the Las Vegas courthouse: ?God of peace, give us a world without drones, bombs, nuclear weapons, or war. Give us your spirit of nonviolent, universal love that we might relieve human suffering, welcome your reign of peace with justice, and be worthy to be called your beloved sons and daughters.?

Today, as we prepare for trial, please join us in prayer.

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To follow the trial of the Creech 14, visit Voices for Creative Nonviolence, at www.vcnv.org.

John Dear's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with 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 [5]. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn [6]. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat on Gospel Nonviolence, go to www.johndear.org [7].

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