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Drone protesters acquitted in New York court

John Dear | Oct. 29, 2013 On the Road to Peace

A few weeks ago, 16-year-old Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani girl who was shot by the Taliban and survived and now speaks out globally for peace, met with President Barack Obama and told him to stop the deadly U.S. drone attacks on Pakistan. They are killing innocent civilians and turning many ordinary people against the U.S. and onto the side of Taliban, she said. This young peacemaker spoke truth to power on behalf of everyone, and her message was heard far and wide. This, for me, is a great sign of hope.

Indeed, there are other signs of a growing groundswell against the ongoing U.S. drone wars. On Thursday, a Syracuse, N.Y., judge acquitted five Catholic activists of a disorderly conduct charge for blocking the entrance to Hancock Field Air National Guard Base. Hancock is home to the 174th Attack Wing of the Air Force National Guard, a regional headquarters of the U.S. Reaper drones where technicians pilot drones over Afghanistan.

The five activists -- Carmen Trotta, Ellen Grady, Fr. Bill Pickard, Linda LeTendre and Bill Frankel-Streit -- acted Feb. 13, Ash Wednesday, to draw attention to the evils of our drone killing machines that can often be found in our own backyards.

"We come to Hancock Airfield, home of the National Reaper Drone Maintenance and Training Center ... to remember the victims of our drone strikes and to ask God's forgiveness for the killing of other human beings, most especially children," they said in their original statement [1]. "The killer drone strikes and the US's killer drone policies have taken the lives of thousands in a number of countries, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

"These strikes are illegal and immoral," the statement said. "Under international agreements, which the US has signed, the killing of civilians, extra-judicial murders, violations of national sovereignty, and violations of due process are ALL illegal acts.

"We come to Hancock Airfield this Ash Wednesday to repent for the actions of our government and to ask God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of the people we daily terrorize with these drones. We remind ourselves that our lives are brief and mysterious, and that 'from dust we were created and to dust we shall return!' ... Lent is a time to repent -- literally, to change our minds. It is a time to REMIND ourselves of Jesus' command to love our neighbors and our enemies. It is a time to REMIND ourselves of Jesus' radical, non-violent message [of] love. Stop the Killing. Ground the Drones. STOP the Wars."

"We told the judge that we were not alienated citizens, but rather, engaged citizens," my friend Carmen Trotta of the St. Joseph House Catholic Worker in New York City told me on the phone after the verdict. "Ultimately, it seems the judge was moved by our consciences."

Carmen noted the recent public opposition to drones in reports by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and The Bureau of Investigative Journalism as well as statements by Jesuit Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, superior general of the Society of Jesus; Ben Emmerson, UN special rapporteur on counter-terrorism; and Malala, whom many

thought deserved the Nobel Peace Prize.

The recent Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports both detailed how U.S. drone strikes kill innocent civilians in Pakistan and Yemen, contrary to President Obama's assertions. According to the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism [2], as many as 1,000 innocent civilians, including as many as 200 children, have been killed in as many as 376 U.S. drone strikes since 2004 in Pakistan alone, a nation with which the United States is not technically at war.

"We will pray and continue to act in the hope that the children of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, and all countries will someday soon be without the terror of drones or any wars," defendant Ellen Grady said after the acquittal.

"My hope is that dissent is once again welcome in the United States and we will turn away from killing to caring as a country," said defendant Linda LeTendre.

Carmen had expected eight days in the Syracuse jail. The judge, a Catholic, seemed to listen carefully from the start and took down notes on their arguments, he said. They spoke about the effects of the drone strikes, the history of civil disobedience in changing public policy, and the many friends who have developed real relationships with people in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan.

"Drones violate and destroy international law and international order," Carmen said he told the court. "We've been continually lied to about the people we have killed, the civilians we have killed, and the militants we have killed. The U.S. believes it is waging a full-scale war against the Taliban in Yemen, and it's being done in secrecy, but it's totally illegal."

At one point, the pro se defendants questioned the police officer who arrested them and asked him if he had taken an oath to uphold the Constitution. Of course, he said. Was he aware of Article 6, which speaks of upholding all U.S. treaties, including international law? No, the officer said.

"It's sad that we don't know Article 6 or uphold it," they told the judge later. "Maybe we should know it, maybe the police should know it, maybe we all need to step up to the plate and learn about it if we are going to live in a democratic society," Carmen said, repeating what they told the judge. "The alternative is a national security state."

At another point, the prosecutor asked Carmen while he was on the stand about the blue scarf Carmen wore around his neck. Carmen told the court about the Afghan Peace Volunteers, whom I visited in December. They wear blue scarves to remind us that we all share the same blue sky and that we can all live together in peace. When I left Kabul, the youth put one such scarf on me.

"Because of our friends who have visited the Afghan Peace Volunteers," Carmen said in court, "our knowledge of these wars is more intimate."

"I want to send them to jail," the judge told the packed courtroom while rendering his verdict, "but I just don't see *mens rea*." He was referring to the Latin legal term for "guilty mind." In other words, the judge agreed that the five defendants intended to uphold, not break, the law and that they were not guilty of any crime, especially in the face of U.S. criminal activity through these illegal drone attacks.

The nonviolent direct action of the five defendants and the judge's ruling of their innocence are a sign of hope for all who care for peace, but especially for young Malala, friends in the Afghan Peace Volunteers and all children terrorized by war and our drone strikes.

May this Ash Wednesday witness and their acquittal inspire all of us to speak out like Malala against these illegal and impractical wars and weapons, that we might finally learn to institutionalize nonviolent conflict resolution and welcome a new world of peace.

[John Dear's new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, is now available at paceebene.org [3] and Amazon.com [4]. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour. To see John's speaking schedule, to invite him to speak in your church or peace group, or to join his work with Campaign Nonviolence [5], go to his website [6] or contact the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene [7]. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [8] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [9], *Put Down Your Sword* [10] and *A Persistent Peace* [11], are available from Amazon.com.]

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