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CIA seeks significant expansion of its assassination drone fleet

10/19/2012

American spy agency, the CIA, has called for a significant expansion of its fleet of assassination drones to bolster the agency's terror campaign of targeted bombings in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere.

The plan, submitted to the White House by CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) Director David Petraeus, would enable the spy agency not only to boost its persisting campaign of deadly strikes against suspected militant areas in Yemen and Pakistan, but also shift the assassination drones to "emerging al-Qaeda threats in North Africa or other trouble spots," US daily *The Washington*

Post reported on Friday, quoting officials that spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the issue.

One American official said the request by Petraeus, a former top military official who commanded US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, reflects a US concern that "political turmoil across the Middle East and North Africa has created new openings for al-Qaeda and its affiliates," according to the report.

"With what happened in Libya, we're realizing that these places are going to heat up," said the official, referring to the September 11 incident at the US Consulate in the Libyan city of Benghazi, where four Americans, including the US ambassador to the African country, were killed following a massive anti-US demonstration to protest the release of a film that grossly insulted Muslims and their highly revered Prophet Mohamed (PBUH).

No decision has so far been taken about shifting armed CIA assassination drones into the North Africa region but contingency plans are being mapped out, according to the official. "I think we're actually looking forward a little bit."

American officials at the White House, the CIA and the Defense Department have refused to comment on the drone expansion proposal, says the daily, and those who did, spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Washington officials, says the report, are "particularly concerned" about the emergence of pro-al-Qaeda militants in North Africa, following the downfall of pro-US regimes in Libya and Mali.

Seeking to reinforce their intelligence surveillance in the region, the US has been forced to "rely on small, unarmed turboprop aircraft disguised as private planes."

The CIA, according to the report, also maintains a separate fleet of stealth surveillance drones, the use of which were exposed when one of them was brought down intact in 2011 by Iranian forces while on a surveillance flight over the country. Such drones were also used to monitor "bin Laden's compound" in Pakistan before a US military assault to kill him, the daily claims.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has promoted collaborations between the CIA and the military in what it advertises as "counterterrorism operations," leading to "a blurring of their traditional roles," according to the Post. In Yemen, the CIA routinely "borrows" the aircraft of the military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) to carry out strikes. The joint command is growingly engaged in operations that resemble espionage.

Moreover, says the daily, any decision to extend the reach of CIA's fleet of armed assassination drones would most likely require the spy agency to establish additional secret bases overseas. The CIA relies on American military pilots to fly the drones from bases in the southwestern US "but has been reluctant to share overseas landing strips with the Defense Department."

The CIA's pilotless Predators used in terror strikes over Pakistan are flown out of airstrips along the border in Afghanistan. The agency established a secret base on the Arabian Peninsula when it

began its drone attacks over Yemen, even though JSOC drones are flown from a separate facility in Djibouti.

On Wednesday, Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik announced that contrary to US claims, 80 percent of people killed by US assassination drone strikes in the country are innocent civilians.

Talking to reporters outside the Parliament, Malik added that the total of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks conducted by US drones in Pakistan amounted to 336 attacks, killing nearly 2,300 people.

Despite Islamabad's repeated calls on Washington to end the terror drone attacks, the US government continues its strikes on the tribal regions of the country.

Meanwhile in Yemen, a recent report by the country's National Organization for Defending Rights and Freedoms states that over 300 people have been killed in the strikes carried out in the southern regions of the country so far in 2012.

The aerial attacks were initiated by former US President George W. Bush, but have escalated under President Barack Obama.

The United Nations has censured American drone attacks as targeted killings and says they flout international law.