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The Guardian

US drone strikes in Pakistan claiming many civilian victims, says campaigner

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For the past three years, Noor Behram has hurried to the site of drone strikes in his native Waziristan. His purpose: to photograph and document the impact of missiles controlled by a joystick thousands of miles away, on US air force bases in Nevada and elsewhere. The drones are America's only weapon for hunting [al-Qaida](#) and the [Taliban](#) in what is supposed to be the most dangerous place in the world.

Sometimes arriving on the scene just minutes after the explosion, he first has to put his camera aside and start digging through the debris to see if there are any survivors. It's dangerous, unpleasant work. The drones frequently hit the same place again, a few minutes after the first strike, so looking for the injured is risky. There are other dangers too: militants and locals are suspicious of anyone with a camera. After all, it is a local network of spies working for the CIA that are directing the drone strikes.

But Noor Behram says his painstaking work has uncovered an important – and unreported – truth about the US drone campaign in [Pakistan's](#) tribal region: that far more civilians are being injured or dying than the Americans and Pakistanis admit. The world's media quickly reports on how many militants were killed in each strike. But reporters don't go to the spot, relying on unnamed Pakistani intelligence officials. Noor Behram believes you have to go to the spot to figure out whether those killed were really extremists or ordinary people living in Waziristan. And he's in no doubt.

"For every 10 to 15 people killed, maybe they get one militant," he said. "I don't go to count how many Taliban are killed. I go to count how many children, women, innocent people, are killed."

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The drone strikes are a secret programme run by the CIA to assassinate al-Qaida and Taliban extremists using remote, wild Waziristan as a refuge. The CIA does not comment on drones, but privately claims civilian casualties are rare.

The Guardian was unable to independently verify the photographs. Noor Behram's account of taking the pictures appeared detailed and consistent however. Other anecdotal evidence from Waziristan is conflicting: some insist the drones are accurate, while others strongly disagree.

According to Noor Behram, the strikes not only kill the innocent but injure untold numbers and radicalise the population. "There are just pieces of flesh lying around after a strike. You can't find bodies. So the locals pick up the flesh and curse America. They say that America is killing us inside our own country, inside our own homes, and only because we are Muslims.

"The youth in the area surrounding a strike gets crazed. Hatred builds up inside those who have seen a drone attack. The Americans think it is working, but the damage they're doing is far greater."

Even when the drones hit the right compound, the force of the blast is such that neighbours' houses, often made of baked mud, are also demolished, crushing those inside, said Noor Behram. One of the photographs shows a tangle of debris he said were the remains of five houses blitzed together.

The photographs make for difficult viewing and leave no doubt about the destructive power of the Hellfire missiles unleashed: a boy with the top of his head missing, a severed hand, flattened houses, the parents of children killed in a strike. The chassis is all that remains of a car in one photo, another shows the funeral of a seven-year-old child. There are pictures, too, of the cheap rubber flip-flops worn by children and adults, which often survive: signs that life once existed there. A 10-year-old boy's body, prepared for burial, shows lipstick on him and flowers in his hair – a mother's last loving touch.

There are photos of burned and battered Qur'ans – but no pictures of women: the conservative culture in Waziristan will not allow Noor Behram to photograph the women, even dead and dismembered. So he makes do with documenting shredded pieces of women's clothing.

The jagged terrain, the often isolated location of strikes, curfews and the presence of Taliban, all mean that it is a major challenge to get to the site of a drone strike. Noor Behram has managed to reach 60, in both North and South Waziristan, in which he estimates more than 600 people were killed. An [exhibition of his work, at London's Beaconsfield gallery](#) opening on Tuesday, features pictures from 27 different drone strikes. Clive Stafford Smith, head of Reprieve, the campaigning group, has launched a lawsuit along with a Pakistani lawyer, Shahzad Akbar, seeking to bring to justice those responsible for civilian deaths from drones. "I think these pictures are deeply important evidence," said Stafford Smith. "They put a human face [on the drone strike campaign] that is in marked contrast to what the US is suggesting its operators in Nevada and elsewhere are doing. "They show the reality of ordinary people being killed and losing their homes, not senior al-Qaida members."

The programme of drone strikes was ramped up under the Obama administration. Last year saw the greatest number of attacks, 118, while there have been 45 so far in 2011, according to a tally kept by the New America Foundation, a thinktank based in Washington. *Gaming in Waziristan, an exhibition including images of the aftermath of drone strikes in North Waziristan, opens at Beaconsfield, 22 Newport Street, London SE11 6AY info@beaconsfield.ltd.uk*

One victim's story

Sadaullah, a 15-year-old, lost one eye and both legs in a drone strike on 7 September 2009, during the month of Ramadan, near Mir Ali town in North Waziristan. Three family members died, including an uncle who used a wheelchair. It was reported at the time that three Taliban commanders – rather than his three relatives – were killed in the strike.

"It struck after Iftar," says the shy Sadaullah, referring to the breaking of the fast in the evening during Ramadan.

It had been a happy day for Sadaullah, who was looking forward to the evening when a feast was going to be served at his house, as his grandfather and uncles were visiting to break their fast.

After saying his prayer, Sadaullah, was entering the room where the other guests had already taken their place for the evening feast when the missile hit. Something heavy fell on his legs, requiring them both to be later amputated.

He also lost his uncle Mautullah Jan, who was in a wheelchair for the past decade, and two his cousins, Kadaanullah Jan and Sabir-ud-Din.

Now Sadaullah does not go to school and gets only a religious education in a madrasa – Islamic seminary – in his village. Sadaullah sees no hope for the future but says that the madrasa "is good for me, as it keeps me busy".

Sadaullah is one of the victims on whose behalf British human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith is to launch a lawsuit against the CIA's former legal chief, John Rizzo, who approved dozens of drone strikes on Pakistan's tribal region.