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The CIA's drone campaign targeting suspected militants in Pakistan has killed dozens of civilians who had gone to rescue victims or were attending funerals. So concludes a new report by the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism. It found that since President Obama took office three years ago, as many as 535 civilians have been killed, including more than 60 children. The investigation also revealed that at least 50 civilians were killed in follow-up strikes when they had gone to help victims. More than 20 civilians have also been attacked in deliberate strikes on funerals and mourners. We speak to Chris Woods, award-winning reporter with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. "We noted that there were repeated reports at the time, contemporaneous reports in publications like New York Times, news agencies like Reuters, by CNN, that there were these strikes on rescuers, that there were reports that there had been an initial strike and then, some minutes later, as people had come forward to help and pull out the dead and injured, that drones had returned to the scene and had attacked rescuers," Woods says. "We've been able to name just over 50 civilians that we understand have been killed in those attacks. In total, we think that more than 75 civilians have been killed, specifically in these attacks on rescuers and on mourners, on funeral-goers."

AMY GOODMAN: The CIA's drone campaign in Pakistan has killed dozens of civilians who had gone to rescue victims or were attending funerals. So concludes a new [report](#) by the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism. It found, since President Obama took office three years ago, between 282 and 535 civilians have been reported as killed, including more than 60 children. The investigation also revealed at least 50 civilians were killed in follow-up strikes when they had gone to help victims. More than 20 civilians have also been attacked in deliberate strikes on funerals and mourners.

The report was published days after President Obama defended his administration's use of armed drones during a "virtual interview" conducted last week via Google+ and YouTube. He also acknowledged the United States was carrying out drone strikes inside Pakistan. President Obama made the comments after he was asked how he feels about the large number of civilians killed by these drones since he took office.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: I want to make sure that people understand, actually, drones have not caused a huge number of civilian casualties. For the most part, they have been very precise precision strikes against al-Qaeda and their affiliates. And we are very careful in terms of how it's been applied. So, I think that there's this perception somehow that we're just

sending in a whole bunch of strikes willy-nilly. This is a targeted, focused effort at people who are on a list of active terrorists who are trying to go in and harm Americans, hit American facilities, American bases, and so on. It is important for everybody to understand that this thing is kept on a very tight leash.

AMY GOODMAN: President Obama, discussing the drones program in a virtual interview.

Meanwhile, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a case last week to force the Obama administration to release legal and intelligence records related to the targeted killing of U.S. citizens in drone attacks in Yemen last year. The lawsuit charged the Justice and Defense Departments and the CIA with illegally failing to respond to requests made in October under the Freedom of Information Act.

To find out more about drone strikes, we go to London to speak to the lead author of the Bureau report. Chris Woods is an award-winning reporter with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. He leads the Bureau's drones investigation team.

Talk about your research and exactly what you found, Chris.

CHRIS WOODS: Good morning, Amy, and thanks for having the Bureau back on.

We've been looking at this since August of last year. When we were putting together our massive database on CIA drone strikes in Pakistan, we noted that there were repeated reports at the time, contemporaneous reports in publications like *New York Times*, news agencies like Reuters, by CNN, that there were these strikes on rescuers, that there were reports that there had been an initial strike and then, some minutes later, as people had come forward to help and pull out the dead and injured, that drones had returned to the scene and had attacked rescuers. Now, we didn't take that at face value when we began a major investigation, that's been ongoing for many months now, that we just published in conjunction with the London *Sunday Times*, where we looked at those 18 original reports, and we've been able to confirm, through our researchers on the ground in Waziristan, that a dozen of those attacks on rescuers, and also two attacks on funerals, have taken place in Waziristan. And we've been able to name just over 50 civilians that we understand have been killed in those attacks. In total, we think that more

than 75 civilians have been killed, specifically in these attacks on rescuers and on mourners, on funeral-goers.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to read to you an excerpt of a [quote](#) that just appeared in the *New York Times*

. "A senior American counterterrorism official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, questioned the report's findings, saying 'targeting decisions are the product of intensive intelligence collection and observation.' The official added: 'One must wonder why an effort that has so carefully gone after terrorists who plot to kill civilians has been subjected to so much misinformation. Let's be under no illusions—there are a number of elements who would like nothing more than to malign these efforts and help Al Qaeda succeed.'" So said an unnamed senior American counterterrorism official in response to your report, Chris Woods.

CHRIS WOODS: I think, obviously, that is a disgraceful comment from an unnamed U.S. official. We've presented our findings in good faith. It's all available on TBIJ's [website](#)

. Our data is transparent. We have linked to all of our sources. Our field investigators have put up their findings. We have eyewitness testimonies. We have a supported interview with the national security correspondent of the *Washington Post*

confirming that his U.S. intelligence sources confirmed to him that CIA

drones willingly and predictably carried out an attack on a funeral in Pakistan deliberately targeting people there. If the CIA's response—or rather, unnamed security official's response—to that is simply to accuse us of aiding al-Qaeda, then something is going significantly wrong at the

CIA

and in the wider U.S. intelligence community.

AMY GOODMAN: Where do you go from here now with this report? And especially, what do you understand is the scope of the drone program? How much is it expanding?

CHRIS WOODS: The drone program right now really does seem to have changed. There were a number of incidents at the back end of last year. The last year was a bad year for U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan. Many things went wrong. A lot of civilians were killed. There was a lot of bad publicity that was generated for the administration. And then, not actually a drone strike, but a NATO air strike which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers last November, effectively ended the drone campaign for about 55 days. It's resumed again, beginning January

12th, but so far this year we've seen four strikes, and the targeting does appear to have changed on the ground.

And just to be clear, the attacks on rescuers and mourners that we note, they've all occurred under the Obama administration between 2009 and July 2011. I think that date is quite interesting, because that's also when Leon Panetta stepped down as head of CIA. You have an interim

A leader, and then David Petraeus comes in. We haven't had any reports from Pakistan since July of last year of attacks on rescuers. So there's an indication of a policy change, and there's also an indication of a targeting change on the ground. So, things may be changing at the moment. We're still trying to get a clearer understanding of what's taking place in Pakistan.

AMY GOODMAN: During President—

CHRIS WOODS: I think the comments that these unnamed officials make really are unhelpful in these circumstances. I think the CIA should be looking—we've given them the names of 53 people on this occasion, named individuals, their tribes, the villages in which they died, the dates on which they died. Their response to that should be to go and have a look at that and to look at their own evidence and to challenge it against what we're putting forward and to see whether they've perhaps got it wrong or perhaps have been misled. This does need an inquiry from CIA into their past targeting practice.

AMY GOODMAN: During President Obama's virtual interview last week with Google+ and YouTube, he also said the drones program was a less intrusive way of targeting al-Qaeda.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: We have to be judicious in how we use drones. But understand that probably our ability to respect the sovereignty of other countries and to limit our incursions into somebody else's territory is enhanced by the fact that we are able to pinpoint strike an al-Qaeda operative in a place where the capacities of that military in that country may not be able to get them. So, obviously, a lot of these strikes have been in the FATA and going after al-Qaeda suspects who are up in very tough terrain along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. For us to be able to get them in another way would involve,

probably, a lot more intrusive military actions than the one that we're already engaging in.

AMY GOODMAN: Chris Woods, your response?

CHRIS WOODS: I think he does raise an interesting point. Of course, we know that U.S. boots on the ground in Pakistan is far more inflammatory than these drone strikes, which almost certainly have been taking place with the secret collusion of the Pakistan government. Boots on the ground would be a disaster for both Pakistan and the United States. And so, the President's view is that the drone strikes, I suppose, are the least worst way of engaging with al-Qaeda.

But I think the President also slightly misrepresents the case in terms of the strikes themselves. Although al-Qaeda are sometimes the target of these drone attacks, in the majority of occasions the targets are actually Afghan Taliban who are fighting an insurgency across the border in Afghanistan. So what we're actually seeing is a counterterrorism organization, the CIA, a civilian organization, carrying out counterinsurgency operations, military operations, relating to the war that's across the border. And that's a problem for the President and for the United States. This isn't just about going for al-Qaeda, which I think Pakistan would have a great deal of support for. Al-Qaeda is no friend to Pakistan. Pakistan has been absolutely key in tracking down and capturing and killing hundreds of al-Qaeda operatives within the country. This is also about the war across the border and about counterinsurgency. And that blurred line is part of the problem, I think.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the difference between attacking Pakistan and Afghanistan, legally?

CHRIS WOODS: When a drone strike occurs in Afghanistan and, for example, a wedding party is hit or civilians are accidentally killed, there is an automatic inquiry. These are military operations carried out by the U.S. military or their allies, and there's a line of accountability. And although people may not be happy with the conclusions that those investigations reach, there is a clear level of accountability.

The moment a drone goes across the border, even if it's targeting the same militant, if a civilian

is killed, there is no accountability that we're aware of. Even CIA agrees that it's killed at least 50, and perhaps as high as 60, civilians. Their figures and ours are very different, and I think that's based on how they interpreted "civilian." But nevertheless,

CIA

agrees that they've killed 50 to 60 civilians. There's not been an investigation into a single one of those civilian deaths, and there's not been a cent of compensation ever paid to anyone who's been killed accidentally in Pakistan. And that's a problem. When you have a covert intelligence agency running a military campaign, your accountability effectively collapses. And I think it's worrying. And recently, the President announced more money going into covert drone strikes and U.S. Special Operations activities. Both of these elements are unaccountable. They're not held to the same levels of accountability as the regular U.S. military. And I think that should be raising concerns. As we've seen with these attacks on rescuers and funeral-goers in Pakistan, when there's an absence of accountability, things happen. And I don't think it's a coincidence that these attacks on rescuers and funeral-goers have taken place without accountability. They're doing it because nobody's stopping them from doing it and nobody's holding them to account for it.

AMY GOODMAN: Chris Woods, we have to leave it there. And I thank you very much.

CHRIS WOODS: And I think that's something that the President should be addressing.

AMY GOODMAN: Thanks, Chris. I want to thank you for being with us, award-winning reporter with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London, leads the Bureau's drones investigation team. We'll link to the [report](#) at democracynow.org.