

By Vijay Prashad

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NORTHAMPTON — No community easily suffers the death of children. Accidents, violent crimes and illness: the cause is immaterial.

No death of a child is for a reason. All such deaths are senseless.

In his emotional address shortly after news came of the massacre in Newtown, Conn., President Obama pointed to the frequency of such mass crimes and nudged the country to widen our field of vision: “Whether it is an elementary school in Newtown, or a shopping mall in Oregon, or a temple in Wisconsin, or a movie theater in Aurora, or a street corner in Chicago — these neighborhoods are our neighborhoods, and these children are our children.”

The contrary nudge came in his last destination, the “street corner in Chicago.”

When a singular mass killing occurs in mainly affluent suburbs, it shocks the nation — and rightly so. But it might be a shock to some to know that this year alone 117 children died from handgun violence in Chicago. These deaths do not get discussed, let alone memorialized in the national conversation of tragedy.

There are at least two reasons for this. First, these deaths do not happen in a spectacular fashion. They take place in ones and twos, often in the lonely hours of the night when bullets depart from their targets and settle in the soft tissue of children asleep in their homes, or in the afternoon as they play on the sidewalk.

Take the case of April 12. One-year-old Jayliah Allen was shot while she slept in her bed, the bullet entering the window. Seven-year-old Derrick Robeteau was shot in the leg while playing outside his grandfather's home and a 7-year-old girl was shot as she stood outside her home. Three children hit by handguns in one day, but in an unspectacular form.

Second, old racist habits linger. These are African-American and Latino kids, whose neighborhoods are considered dangerous. Which is why when Jayliah and Derrick were killed no one called their neighborhoods bucolic or thought that this violence was senseless. There is a hardness that has entered our consciousness, allowing us to avoid the sealed fates of these kids.

No memorials exist as well for the 178 children killed by U.S. drone strikes in the borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Noor Aziz, 8, Talha, 8, Najibullah, 13, Adnan, 16, Hizbullah, 10, Wilayat Khan, 11, Asadullah, 9, Sohail, 7: these are some of the names of children killed by the drones. News reports frequently say “three militants killed,” and then a few days later, in the Pakistani press, one hears that amongst the dead were children with no association with the militants. Unlike the street shootings in Chicago, there have been mass killings by drones, which have received only minimal attention. On Oct. 30, 2006, a U.S. drone struck a school in Bajaur, Pakistan, killing 83 people. The New York Times story ran Nov. 10 with the headline, “American Strike in January Missed Al-Qaeda’s No. 2 By a Few Hours.”

The Times noted in the story that the drone hit “a madrasa, or religious school,” but left it at that. It did not mention that only three of those killed were older than 20. The rest were between the ages of 7 and 17.

There was no apology for this strike, authorized by the White House, no call to put an end to this kind of tragedy. One of the more unseemly coincidences of the Newtown massacre is that just down the road from the elementary school is Forecast International, a military intelligence firm that has been bullish on drones.

On Oct. 23, Time’s Joe Klein was on MSNBC’s Morning Joe. Host Joe Scarborough spoke passionately against the use of drones, saying “it seems so antiseptic and yet you have 4-year-old girls being blown to bits because we have a policy that now says, ‘You know what? Instead of trying to go in and take the risk and get the terrorists out of hiding in a Karachi suburb, we’re just going to blow up everyone around them.’”

Klein, a defender of the Obama record, answered emotionlessly, “The bottom line in the end is — whose 4-year-old gets killed? What we’re doing is limiting the possibility that 4-year-olds here will get killed by indiscriminate acts of terror.”

Such a callous calculation is not Klein’s alone; it is reflected in the general lack of concern for what is being carried out in our name.

No human beings can tolerate to see their children killed. No human beings, not anywhere.

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