

# GAME OF DRONES

CODEPINK'S MEDEA BENJAMIN ON KILLING BY REMOTE CONTROL

By Camilla Mortensen



U.S.A.F.

**O**n Medea Benjamin's first day visiting the Pakistan-Afghan border in 2002, the CodePink: Women for Peace founder met what the U.S. military terms "collateral damage."

Roya, a 13-year-old Afghan girl, approached Benjamin on the street with her hand outstretched and her head cocked to one side, begging for money. Roya's mother and two brothers had been killed in a U.S. drone attack, their house apparently mistaken for part of a nearby Taliban compound.

"When Roya's father came home, he carefully collected all the bits and pieces of his pulverized family that he could find, buried them immediately according to Islamic tradition, then sank into a severe state of shock," Benjamin writes in her book *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control*.

Roya and her two sisters fled with their father to Pakistan. Formerly a street vendor who sold the baked sweets made by his wife, Roya's father now sits and stares into space, unable to function.

These are only some of the lives destroyed, literally torn limb from limb, by U.S. bombs that drop from modern weaponry called unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), unmanned aircraft systems (UASs) or simply: drones.

Benjamin will be in Eugene July 1 at Cozmic to talk about her book and to discuss modern drone warfare and what can be done to stop it. Although drones kill remotely, in the near future their presence may not be so remote to Oregonians. Central Oregon is vying to become a drone-testing area, thanks to a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reauthorization bill passed earlier this year. Benjamin is currently on a book tour to call attention to the "growing menace of robotic warfare."

Benjamin said in a recent interview with *EW*, "People live in constant fear because they hear the buzzing of the drones constantly overhead. Children are

frightened to death" by drone warfare. While proponents call drone strikes "surgical" and "precise," Benjamin's book has a different story of innocent men, women and children blown to pieces and losing limbs as a result of drone strikes. But those images don't get out, she says of the mainstream media coverage.

"We never see drone victims. We never see the charred pieces of flesh hanging on trees," Benjamin says. "It's hard to develop a sense of compassion when you don't see those pictures."

What has fired up some Americans about the drone issue are reports that by

and counties like Otter Tail, Minn., and Herington, Kan. The Forest Service and several universities are also listed among the public agencies that are authorized for drones.

Another group, called Public Intelligence, released a map on June 12 from a U.S. Air Force presentation that shows Portland and Arlington, Ore., as homes to drones. Sen. Ron Wyden has confirmed the Portland site as a drone storage area, and while it's not a launch site, Wyden says drones could be launched from it in an emergency. Arlington is where Boeing-subsiary Insitu has its test airfield.

the development of UAVs must be done with a clear view of both the benefits and the potential for abuse — and Congress must be vigilant to promote the former while aggressively combating the latter."

Wyden's office says that UAVs could present a new opportunity for central Oregon's light aviation industry hit hard by the economic downturn.

The group Economic Development for Central Oregon (EDCO) had been strategizing for more than a year about how to make Oregon one of the six new drone testing sites before the FAA bill gave the new sites the green light

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**Medea Benjamin, author of Drone Warfare**

2020 there could be 30,000 drones cruising U.S. skies under the control of civilian law enforcement. The FAA denies knowledge of where that figure comes from. According to the FAA budget bill, however, the agency must develop regulations for the testing and licensing of commercial drones by 2015, as well as expedite the authorization process for the use of drones by federal, state and local police and other agencies.

The possibility of a swarm of drones worries privacy advocates who warn of the dangers of unmanned craft secretly surveilling and recording everyday citizens.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation obtained, through a federal Freedom of Information Act request, a list of drone-authorized agencies. The list shows that some larger police departments, such as in Houston and Seattle, are authorized for drones, as are smaller ones in cities

Jenna McCulley of the Eugene Police Department says that unless you count robotic devices used in the explosive disposal unit, EPD is not currently employing drone technology. However, if it ever became necessary then EPD would have access to resources via partnering with the National Guard or federal agencies, McCulley says.

Wyden came out strongly in favor of expanding the number of U.S. drone testing sites — the FAA bill calls for six more — and the senator has called central Oregon an ideal site for drone testing. According to his chief-of-staff, Jennifer Hoelzer, "While Sen. Wyden encourages the development of these technologies, it is vital that they not be used to violate constitutional rights or undermine existing protections against government intrusion on private property. As with the internet, GPS and other new technologies,

in February. EDCO proposed the FAA allow drone testing in already established Military Operations Areas (MOA) in the high desert. But within the MOAs there exist proposed wilderness areas, BLM-designated wildlands, wilderness study areas and part of a national wildlife refuge.

Matt Little of the Oregon Natural Desert Association is concerned with the effects of drones on the natural world. According to Little, drone testing in the high desert could affect wildlife such as the sage grouse, a bird species that requires large expanses of undisturbed habitat and has been in decline throughout the West. According to ONDA, sage grouse are warranted to be listed under the Endangered Species Act, but political red tape and a backlog with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have relegated the sage grouse to a waiting list with more than 200 other species.