

February 8, 2022

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden,

We, the undersigned human rights, humanitarian, protection of civilians, peacebuilding, civil liberties, social and racial justice, government accountability, veterans', and faith-based organizations, urge you to lead a much-needed overhaul of U.S. civilian harm policies and practices.<sup>1</sup>

Recent *New York Times* investigations into U.S.-caused civilian harm<sup>2</sup> have documented significant shortcomings in how the U.S. government prevents, investigates, and responds to civilian casualties and damage to civilian objects. These findings illustrate systemic legal and policy flaws that our groups and others have repeatedly raised with the U.S. government for many years.<sup>3</sup>

For two decades, U.S. operations overseas have killed tens of thousands of civilians around the world – primarily from Brown, Black, and Muslim communities – and exacerbated communities' humanitarian needs. Rather than taking effective action to prevent and respond to these harms, the Defense Department has summarily dismissed countless credible claims of civilian casualties and regularly failed to conduct effective or transparent investigations, learn lessons over time, or provide amends, redress, or meaningful accountability.

As Commander-in-Chief, you have ultimate responsibility for how the U.S. prevents and responds to the civilian harm it causes. While many of the civilian casualties at issue occurred

---

<sup>1</sup> Many of our groups also sent a letter on these issues to Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on December 1, 2021: “NGO Letter to US Secretary of Defense Demands Accountability and Reform After 20 Years of Civilian Harm,” *Center for Civilians in Conflict*, December 1, 2021 [\[link\]](#).

<sup>2</sup> Dave Philipps, Eric Schmitt and Mark Mazzetti, “Civilian Deaths Mounted as Secret Unit Pounded ISIS,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 2021, [\[link\]](#); Azmat Khan, Lila Hassan, Sarah Almkhtar, and Rachel Shorey, “The Civilian Casualty Files: Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes,” *The New York Times*, December 18, 2021 [\[link\]](#); Azmat Khan, “The Human Toll of America’s Air Wars,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2021 [\[link\]](#); Azmat Khan, Haley Willis, Christoph Koettl, Christiaan Triebert and Lila Hassan, “Documents Reveal Basic Flaws in Pentagon Dismissal of Civilian Casualty Claims,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2021 [\[link\]](#).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Airwars civilian casualty assessments for Operation Inherent Resolve [\[link\]](#); Amnesty International reports on civilian casualties in Raqqa [\[link\]](#) and West Mosul [\[link\]](#), among others; Center for Civilians in Conflict and Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute, “In Search of Answers: U.S. Military Investigations and Civilian Harm,” *Center for Civilians in Conflict*, February 2020 [\[link\]](#); “Civil Society Guidance for a Model DoD Policy on Civilian Harm,” *InterAction*, March 12, 2020 [\[link\]](#).

during previous administrations, we urge you to take the opportunity to set a new course that matches your pledges of adherence to human rights, moral leadership, transparency, and accountability.

We ask you to publicly recognize the longstanding structural flaws in how the U.S. mitigates, investigates, and responds to civilian deaths and injuries in its operations, and to take the following needed steps:

- Publicly commit to a detailed plan for how the U.S. government will address the systemic shortcomings raised by civil society groups, the media, and the Defense Department's own studies.<sup>4</sup>
- Prioritize the protection of civilians in your ongoing review of U.S. counterterrorism operations and use of force policy and ensure meaningful civil society consultation in that review.
- Ensure full, independent, and transparent investigations of *all* credible reports of civilian harm, including past reports that may have been erroneously dismissed. Investigations should meet international standards for independence, thoroughness, and impartiality, and should evaluate conduct according to the applicable international human rights and international humanitarian law standards.
- Provide meaningful accountability to civilian victims and survivors of U.S. operations by publicly and transparently acknowledging deaths and injuries, providing amends or redress, and appropriately holding civilian leaders and military commanders responsible for their actions, including by addressing findings of wrongdoing through disciplinary measures or prosecutions.

Through your leadership, the U.S. government can finally account for and reckon with the civilian deaths, injuries, and other harms of the last twenty years. Your legacy and commitment to human rights, humanitarianism, and racial justice globally are at stake, and we urge you to seize this opportunity to act.

Signed,

Action on Armed Violence (AOAV)

Airwars

Alliance for Peacebuilding

Alliance of Baptists

American Civil Liberties Union

---

<sup>4</sup> On January 27, 2022, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III issued a directive mandating certain civilian harm mitigation steps, including a new action plan, the creation of a civilian protection “center of excellence,” and the completion of the long-awaited Department of Defense Instruction on Civilian Harm. These steps are welcome, but their impact and specific resulting actions remain to be seen. We continue to urge the systemic reforms needed to address the longstanding issues raised in this letter.

American Muslim Bar Association (AMBA)  
Amnesty International USA  
Beyond the Bomb  
Bridges Faith Initiative  
BUCOFORE (Chad)  
Building Blocks for Peace Foundation (Nigeria)  
CARE USA  
Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)  
Center for Constitutional Rights  
Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) (Nigeria)  
Center for International Policy  
Center for Policy Analysis of Horn of Africa (Somaliland)  
Center for Security, Race and Rights  
Center for Victims of Torture  
Church of the Brethren, Office of Peacebuilding and Policy  
CODEPINK  
Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines (Colombia)  
Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute  
CommonDefense.us  
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces  
Council on American-Islamic Relations  
Defence for Rights and Freedom (Yemen)  
Defending Rights & Dissent  
Demand Progress Education Fund  
Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN)  
The Digital Democracy Project  
Drone Wars UK  
European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR)  
Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR-USA)  
Foundation for Fundamental Rights (Pakistan)  
Franciscan Action Network  
Friends Committee on National Legislation  
Global Justice Clinic, NYU School of Law  
Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict-Southeast Asia (GPPAC-SEA)  
Government Information Watch  
Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (Somalia)  
Human Rights First  
Human Rights Watch  
ICNA Council for Social Justice  
Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID) (Philippines)

Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti  
Institute for Policy Studies, New Internationalism Project  
InterAction  
International Association for Political Science Students  
International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)  
International Rescue Committee  
Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)  
Iraq Body Count  
Justice for Muslims Collective  
Justice Project Pakistan  
Kent State Truth Tribunal  
Lawyers for Justice in Libya  
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns  
MENA Rights Group  
Military Families Speak Out  
Mnemonic  
Muslim Justice League  
Mwatana for Human Rights (Yemen)  
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd  
National Council of Churches  
National Freedom of Information Coalition  
National Organization For Development Society (Yemen)  
National Partnership of Children and Youth in Peacebuilding (Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
National Religious Campaign Against Torture  
No More Guantamos  
North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church  
Norwegian Refugee Council USA  
Nuhanovic Foundation - Centre for War Reparations  
Open The Government  
Oxfam America  
PAX  
Pax Christi USA  
Peace Direct  
Peace Training and Research Organization (Afghanistan)  
Presbyterian Church (USA)  
Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft  
Relieve  
Rethinking Foreign Policy  
RootsAction.org

Saferworld (Washington Office)  
September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows  
Shadow World Investigations  
ShelterBox USA  
South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)  
Stop Fuelling War  
Syria Justice and Accountability Center  
Syria Lebanon Partnership Network of the Presbyterian Church (USA)  
United Church of Christ, Justice and Local Church Ministries  
United for Peace and Justice  
Veterans for American Ideals  
Veterans For Peace  
Washington Office on Latin America  
Western States Legal Foundation  
Win Without War  
Witness Somalia  
Women for Weapons Trade Transparency  
Women's Action for New Directions (WAND)  
World BEYOND War  
Yemeni Youth Forum for Peace  
Youth for Peace and Development (Zimbabwe)