

HUMAN RIGHTS AND YEMEN

Jennifer Gibson, a human rights lawyer working for 'Reprieve', stood in at the last minute for a colleague who had to be in court, to talk to Faringdon Peace Group about human rights in Yemen. Founded in 1999, Reprieve campaigns all over the world against the death penalty, torture and human rights abuses, providing free legal and investigative support to some of the world's most vulnerable people.

Reprieve has had people on the ground in Yemen since 2012, investigating detentions, disappearances and assassinations of activists and suspected terrorists. The US, or its allies on its behalf, is responsible for many of these abuses. Until the recent court case in which the Campaign against Arms Trade successfully sued the government for selling arms to Saudi Arabia, the UK was also responsible for civilian deaths and suffering in Yemen. Jennifer's area of expertise is the use of lethal force by the west under the guise of the war on terror, particularly drone attacks and targeted killings. National security is used as a block to finding out the truth behind such attacks even though targeted killings away from the battlefield are illegal under international law. There is no regulation, no accountability and no transparency. An estimated ¼ to 1/3 of drone strike casualties are civilians – hardly surprising when each drone can carry up to four missiles - but information regarding civilian deaths is classified. Brave organisations like Reprieve give victims a voice, tell their stories and help them to find answers.

Jennifer explained that the US position is that it can decide who is a terrorist, even if this is based on bad intelligence, and take them out. There is no longer any effort to capture suspects and give them a fair trial. Detainees in Guantanamo Bay were all given death sentences without trial, but with the help of Reprieve, 90% of them have been released without charge. Now, instead of detaining terrorist suspects in such places, it is much more convenient for the US to kill them remotely. The US has special observers in half of Africa and in places like the Sahel, where it is worried that terrorist groups are going unchecked, it has taken local conflicts involving criminal activity and imagined they are global terrorist threats, dealing with them accordingly.

Unfortunately the UK is also involved through allowing US spy bases at Croughton and Menwith Hill, which are vital to US intelligence and drone operation. We have our own armed drones, though very few, and in theory they can only be used in the battlefield. But we in the west have set a precedent that other countries are bound to follow and in the unregulated world of drone strikes and targeted killings the consequences could be very dangerous.