



The US Government Kills Black People With Impunity Both at Home and Abroad

By Robtel Neajai Pailey and Amy Niang



In early February of this year, 18-year-old Nurto Kusow Omar Abukar was blown to smithereens by American air strikes as she sat down for dinner with her family in Jilib, Somalia. Hurling indiscriminately by the US Africa Command (Africom) in its hunt for al-Shabaab militants, the bombs also injured Abukar's younger sisters Fatuma, age 12, and Adey, age 7, as well as their 70-year-old grandmother, Khadija Mohamed Gedow. A few weeks later, on February 24, Africom lobbed a Hellfire missile that killed 53-year-old banana farmer Mohamud Salad Mohamud in the nearby village of Kumbareere.

As the murders of Abukar and Mohamud tragically demonstrate, the US military has inflicted some of the most grotesque forms of violence on Africans under the pretext of protecting Americans. According to [Amnesty International](#), the United States has conducted over 170 aerial raids since 2017, triple the number of the previous three years, killing between 900 and 1,000 Somalis. And while there has been almost no public uproar about black African civilian casualties of America's War on Terrorism abroad, they parallel black civilian casualties of domestic law enforcement at home.

Months after Africom's bombardments in Somalia, many of us watched and wept in horror as George Floyd was asphyxiated on the streets of Minneapolis, his immobile body pinned down by the knee of

a white police officer. The irony that Floyd's demise occurred on Africa Day, May 25, which commemorates the founding of the Organization of African Unity, was not lost on those of us who see the continuities of anti-black racism on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the fate of Abukar, Mohamud, and Floyd lies a glaring connection: While US militarisation in Africa frames the black body as an "enemy without," American policing deems the black body an "enemy within."

We can't breathe.

As with the deadly shelling of Somalia, American "shadow wars" in Africa are fought covertly and violate international law. The highly secretive and advanced nature of these military operations—which rely on artificial intelligence, drones, and surveillance technology—renders them invisible to American citizens. Yet they persist. Day after day, year after year.

The "security needs" of the United States make manifest a desire to control territories far away, to exploit and extract their resources, and to subdue their people; the "security needs" of white America make manifest a desire to police black bodies into submission, to push them to the fringes, and in many cases to annihilate them.

In both instances, the rhetoric of "keeping America safe" is a vision that regards racialised bodies as threats to be eliminated. According to this white supremacist line of reasoning, the black body is not only dangerous but also disposable. It must be shackled and suffocated, caged and contained, burned and bludgeoned. Police brutality in America and US militarization in Africa operate under similar logics.

America's military parades around Africa like a peacock brandishing its plumes. Since Africom commenced in 2008 with active combat missions in over a dozen African countries—including Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda—it has "conducted more than 1,500 air attacks, commando raids, and other ground missions in Libya and Somalia alone," [according to *The Intercept*](#). Indeed, the United States has pelted Libya with at least 776 strikes since 2011, many during the first round of assaults unleashed by NATO and the Obama administration in "support" of the rebels who executed Moammar El-Gadhafi.

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We Africans are all too familiar with this outward expression of American aggression and its structural dismissal of black life—from the use of machine guns and tanks to drones and rocket-propelled grenades. Now, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, much of this [wartime weaponry](#) has been transported as excess equipment to police departments across the United States in a covert move to militarize law enforcement.

And so when active duty troops were deployed in the District of Columbia to squash protests prompted by Floyd's death, we were not surprised. While a group of 89 former American defense officials [declared](#) that "the military must never be used to violate constitutional rights," the human rights of Africans are flouted regularly by the United States' militarized foreign policy. Since 9/11, in fact, the US military has used a range of systems and strategies—from operating drone launching pads in Niger and airfields in Kenya and Djibouti to running training exercises meant to beef up the repressive capacity of affiliate governments—to expand its [footprint](#) in the continent.

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Yet, even though African Union Commission chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat aptly [denounced](#) racialized police violence in the United States, there hasn't been a similarly forceful condemnation of the militarization of American engagement in Africa. In fact, some African leaders have even been the greatest threats to black life in the continent. Just these last months, under the guise of enforcing Covid-19 lockdowns, police and military have killed innocent citizens of Liberia, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda.

These acts of cruelty follow a long history of anti-black violence. Euro-American whites in particular have weaponized state-sanctioned hostility against people of black African descent for as long, it seems, as the earth has tilled on its axis. Myriad examples stain our histories with blood: from the torture and execution of Mau Mau revolutionaries in 1950s Kenya by British colonizers to the assassination in 1961 of Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba with the aid of Belgian and American collusion; from the 1999 shooting of unarmed Guinean national Amadou Diallo by four white officers on his New York doorstep to the scorching to death of Sierra Leonean Oury Jalloh while in German police custody in 2005; from the 2016 murder of Malian Adama Traoré by French law enforcement to the 2018 gunning down of Afro-Brazilian feminist activist and politician Marielle Franco in Rio de Janeiro by the "Crime Bureau."

Indeed, anti-black brutality is a global affliction, and it's not just confined to the four corners of the United States. The forces of racism have been kneeling on the necks of black people in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and Latin America for centuries.

The righteous rage exhibited by Africans on the streets of Lagos, Lusaka, Monrovia, Nairobi, and Tripoli in solidarity with their brothers and sisters in D.C., Chicago, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and New York has been powerful to witness. But this must not remain a unidirectional show of support. When innocent African lives are snuffed out as a result of America's War on Terrorism in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Gulf of Guinea, we must also rise up.

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Although the [Movement for Black Lives](#) (#BlackLivesMatter) has rightly [demanded](#) the divestment and defunding of American police forces, and "[a cut in military expenditures](#)," added to this appeal should be the complete demilitarization of the US presence in Africa and formal investigations into atrocities already committed.

This moment is an important inflection point for global black solidarity, for a return to the [black internationalism](#) of a bygone era, which clearly defined the [continuities](#) between civil rights struggles in America and demands for decolonization in Africa.

While condemning modern-day lynchings in the so-called "land of the free," we must also denounce America's militarized massacres abroad. The murders of George Floyd, Nurto Kusow Omar Abukar, and Mohamud Salad Mohamud must remind us again and again that black lives will never truly matter in the United States unless they also matter in Africa and its diasporas.

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