

September 2, 2026

To the Chairs and Ranking Members of the Appropriations, Armed Services, Foreign Affairs and Relations, Judiciary, and Intelligence Committees of the House and Senate:

One year has passed since the Trump administration launched its campaign targeting civilians in the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean. That campaign has killed [hundreds](#) of individuals without due process or, as the administration [admits](#), even an effort to identify the victims. A separate operation, recently reported to have been conducted covertly by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), has targeted and attacked at least three additional fishing vessels. The administration has weaponized terrorism designations and counterterrorism authorities to justify this lethal force, evidently intending to convert counter-terrorism into an open-ended mandate untethered from due process, congressional authorization, or meaningful judicial review. We, the undersigned human rights, veterans, and faith-based civil society organizations, write to you on this shameful anniversary to urge vigorous congressional opposition to this U.S. taxpayer-funded wave of immoral and unlawful killings. We urge you to defund and halt these extrajudicial executions and to prioritize investigating and advancing accountability for them in this and future Congresses.

These strikes are extrajudicial killings, a form of murder. When someone is accused of a crime – such as drug trafficking – the fundamental tenets of justice require the due process of law and an opportunity for defendants to demonstrate their innocence. The boat strikes, by contrast, provide no process and no evidence, simply summary execution. Over the course of these operations, mostly conducted under the so-called “Operation Southern Spear,” the Trump administration’s policy of using the U.S. armed forces to attack suspected drug smugglers in Latin America has killed at least [227](#) people posing no military threat to the United States and outside of any armed conflict. A parallel operation, which the *Washington Post* has [identified](#) as a CIA covert program run out of El Salvador, has targeted at least three Ecuadorian fishing boats, resulting in the outright disappearance of the crew of the *Fiorella* and the assault on and temporary detention of the crews of the *Don Maca* and the *Negra Francisca Duarte II*.

Apart from disturbing strike videos that dehumanize the individuals killed for likes on social media, the operation is almost entirely opaque. The administration refuses to release: the list of “Designated Terrorist Organizations” the operation purports to disrupt; the Department of Justice Office of Legal Counsel memo that attempts to legally justify the operation; the targeting guidelines (which reportedly do not [require](#) the positive identification of individuals, nor the [presence](#) of narcotics, on boats being struck); and the full and unedited video of the strikes, including at least one “double tap” strike on survivors of an initial attack on September 2, 2025. There would be no accounting of the people killed without the work of journalists and civil society organizations to provide the public with independent access to stories of the strikes’ victims – from Trinidadian farm workers [killed](#) while traveling to reunite with family, to already struggling Venezuelan and Colombian fishermen who have [curtailed](#) their trade out of fear for their lives.

The administration's total lack of public transparency only underscores the profound challenges that this unlawful campaign poses to the rule of law and constitutional order. Presidential authority under Article II of the Constitution cannot be contorted to cover lethal strikes against civilians for suspected criminal activity, summarily denying them not only basic due process, but their right to life. Former Judge Advocate General officers from across the U.S. armed services have [sounded](#) the alarm over both the [operation](#) and the [legal jeopardy](#) in which it places U.S. servicemembers. The former head of the U.S. Southern Command reportedly [stepped](#) down after raising objections to the operations. Partner governments have [limited](#) intelligence sharing with the U.S. government rather than risk complicity in these violations. Congress has also not authorized the operation, which has already cost [billions](#) of dollars and mobilized thousands of troops and key military assets; indeed, Congress has no legal or justifiable basis for an authorization, given the patent illegality of the campaign under U.S. and international law. The administration's promised pivot to U.S. military operations on "land" in various Latin American countries does not sidestep these fundamental legal and constitutional challenges.

These strikes are not only illegal and immoral, but also ineffective at curbing drug supplies and weakening drug trafficking organizations. Even current SOUTHCOM commander General Francis Donovan has [acknowledged](#) before Congress that the boat strikes "aren't the answer" to the nation's drug problems. Supplies of cocaine, the main drug that is smuggled from South America, remain unaffected. According to Customs and Border Protection, the volume of cocaine seized in the ten months after the strikes began actually [increased](#) two percent over the ten preceding months. Street prices for cocaine also remain steady, and there are no noticeable changes in its purity, strong indications that cocaine supply is meeting users' demand as well as it did before the strikes. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has, internally, reached this same conclusion. According to a DEA assessment reviewed by the [Washington Post](#), "DEA analysts found the strikes had failed to affect the supply or price of cocaine in the United States and had led traffickers to diversify" their means of methods of transport, an outcome predicted by numerous drug policy experts. While overall U.S. drug overdose deaths continue to [decline](#), the administration cannot take credit for a trend that began in 2023 and relates mostly to fentanyl, a substance that "Operation Southern Spear" has not even [targeted](#). Far from contributing to the decline in overdose deaths, the administration and Congress are putting progress at risk by enacting draconian [cuts](#) to healthcare and public health services upon which so many U.S. communities rely to address substance use and addiction. In addition, the designations used to justify the attacks create serious financial and legal risk for humanitarians, civil society, faith-based groups, and community organizations operating in affected areas, potentially accused of materially supporting terrorism.

Faced with this futile and deadly campaign, some members of Congress have acted responsibly by seeking to rein in the unlawful and reckless use of military force, even as narrow majorities in both chambers block decisive action to end this abuse of power. A number of lawmakers have repeatedly condemned the campaign as illegal, immoral, and ineffective in statements and letters. Some have introduced, and many have voted for, war powers [resolutions](#) to terminate the attacks, and others have sought to prohibit further funding for them. Many have taken time

at hearings and in floor statements to share what can be shared about the operation's thin legal rationale and unnerving rules of engagement.

When Congress finally decides to uphold its constitutional duty, these members' work will form the basis for needed action against, and accountability for, the boat strikes. One year on, there is no time to waste on the road to this reckoning; this Congress can start to right the ship by conducting effective oversight and applying its findings and conclusions to the appropriations and authorization legislation currently under consideration in both chambers. Failing this, the 120th Congress must adopt an aggressive oversight agenda through legislation, hearings and committee-level investigations, and other avenues as necessary.

Operating through your relevant committees, and/or through specially empowered select committees or task forces, Congress should:

- 1. Compel an immediate end to unlawful U.S. boat strikes by prohibiting funding for the use of lethal force against suspected drug traffickers or vessels suspected of trafficking drugs, including "Operation Southern Spear", Joint Task Force-Western Hemisphere, parallel CIA operations, and any similar or successor operations.**
- 2. Hold hearings that compel testimony from senior administration officials and from senior officers in the relevant operational chains of command, and invite testimony from former U.S. government personnel who dissented from the policy as well as survivors of the strikes, in order to investigate:**
 - a. Likely violations of U.S. and international law;
 - b. Flaws in the legal justifications for the strikes, including the arguments laid out in the OLC memo;
 - c. Development of the president's boat strikes policy, including which civilian officials across the White House, the Departments of Defense and State, and the CIA were most responsible for shaping and advancing it;
 - d. Operationalization of the policy, including how relevant commanders and remaining judge advocates in the U.S. armed forces and officials within the CIA applied and executed civilian orders; and
 - e. The harm posed by the strikes to civilians, including the exposure of all available information about the people killed and disappeared in these actions, to bring closure to families and communities.
- 3. Conduct investigations into potential wrongdoing by administration officials, including:**
 - a. The collection and preservation of evidence of wrongdoing;
 - b. As warranted, the issuance of referrals to federal prosecutors; and
 - c. The production of recommendations to the Department of Justice for appropriate accountability measures.

4. Force transparency around the boat strikes, including public release of:

- a. Unedited footage of all of the strikes, including the September 2, 2025 “double-tap” strike;
- b. The OLC memo justifying the strikes;
- c. Any and all execute orders pertaining to the strikes, including the August 2025 execute order (EXORD) that contains targeting criteria for the operation;
- d. Any order or other documentation relating to the recovery of survivors of the strikes;
- e. All available documentation about the people killed in these actions;
- f. Any internal Department of Defense judge advocate memos justifying the strikes;
- g. Any internal CIA memos detailing or justifying its own parallel operations; and
- h. The full list of “Designated Terrorist Organizations” referenced but never released by the administration.

5. Advance legislation to:

- a. Strengthen mechanisms for Congress to act on its inherent authority to check unlawful uses of force by the president, including by adopting expedited procedures for legislation prohibiting funding for unauthorized uses of force;
- b. Restore and expand funding to public health programs and initiatives that reduce drug overdose deaths and address substance use disorders, including counseling, treatment, and recovery housing;
- c. Ensure accountability and remedy for the families of people killed in these operations; and
- d. Prohibit the use of counter-terrorism authorities to recast drug trafficking, migration, or transnational organized crime as terrorism, and require that responses to organized crime proceed through ordinary criminal-law, anti-corruption, anti-trafficking, and transnational organized crime framework, with full respect for due process and human rights.

Sincerely,

Action Corps

American Friends Service Committee

Amnesty International USA

Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)

Center for Constitutional Rights

Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR)

Center for Engagement and Advocacy in the Americas (CEDA)

Center for International Policy

Center for Victims of Torture

Charity & Security Network (C&SN)

CODEPINK

Common Defense

Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Region
CPDCS
Defending Rights & Dissent
Demand Progress
Democratic Messaging Project
Drug Policy Alliance
Government Information Watch
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Foreign Policy for America
Human Rights First
Latin America Working Group (LAWG)
MoveOn
Muslims for Just Futures
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Immigration Law Center
National Priorities Project at the Institute for Policy Studies
Oxfam America
Peace Action
Public Citizen
Relieve US
September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows
StoptheDrugWar.org
Quixote Center
The Chamberlain Network
The United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society
United for Peace and Justice
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)
Win Without War