DRONES
(Michael Dennis February 2011)

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV's) also known as drones, are remotely-piloted aircraft controlled from the ground or autonomously following a pre-programmed mission. There are two basic categories: those that are used purely for surveillance and those armed with missiles.

Larger drones are launched by ground support troops in the war zone and then control is handed over to a crew who sit in front of screen. For instance, the aircraft launched by US or UK troops in Kandahar airbase in Afghanistan are controlled by operators at Creech United States Air Force base in the Nevada desert.

Drones were first used in the 1990s in the Balkan conflict and were primarily for surveillance. The first use of a drone to fire a missile was in Yemen in 2002. The production and cost of armed drones has increased exponentially and they are now being developed to be able to select and despatch targets without the need for human intervention! They are seen as an attractive option because they do not put the lives of expensively trained pilots at risk. They have been used in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen and by Israel in operations in Gaza where civilians have borne the brunt of the attacks.

Civilian casualties for drone strikes cannot be confirmed with accuracy but even the conservative New American Foundation records that from 2004 to summer 2010, between 908 and 1,347 individuals have been killed by drone strikes with about one third being civilians. These figures are disputed with suggestions that the ratio may be as high as 50 civilians for every "militant" losing their life.

Issues raised:
1. The body of international law that governs conduct in war enshrines within it the principle of distinction which requires parties to the conflict to distinguish between combatants and civilians and to ensure immunity from acts of violence.
2. Given that the US and Pakistan are not at war, individuals are being singled out for killing on the basis of being suspected terrorists with no opportunity to defend themselves. This amounts to what international lawyers call state sanctioned assassinations using combat drones.

3. These weapons mean that the civilian populations live in a constant climate of terror. Even General Petraus has admitted to the US House of Representatives that drone attacks are "deeply aggravating to the population".

4. How reliable is the technology? What would be the consequences of a "lost" drone crashing on a large civilian population or insurgents hacking into the network system?

Armed drones tend to be of military advantage in places where the "enemy" are technologically undeveloped; in other words where the rich and powerful can inflict their will on the poor and weak. The idea that slick, new weapons will solve human conflict is an old and enduring myth. In truth, violence will not bring an end to violence. Peace is not the destination of the way we travel. Peace is the way we travel.

(With acknowledgements to the Fellowship of Reconciliation)

A video clip of Predator and Reaper drones being operated from Creech Airbase in Nevada produced by CBS news can be seen by copying this link into your search box.

http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=5245555n&tag=related;photovideo

In early November, an article by Richard Norton-Taylor and Nicholas Watt in the Guardian reported that treaties were to be signed in London by David Cameron and Nicholas Sarkozy committing their respective countries to decades-long co-operation on defence and security. This co-operation would include the mutual use of aircraft carriers and having a joint expeditionary force. Co-operation on submarine technologies, satellite communications and the production of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), would be agreed on the grounds of being cost-effective To commit not only this generation but the next to the continued nuclear weapon tests and production of drones which have been shown to be responsible for the killing of children and other civilians, is a policy which should be resisted.

 Following the Fellowship of Reconciliation(FOR)'s Drone Wars conference in September 2010, a network of concerned organisations has formed under the rubric of 'Drones Campaign Network'(DCN), not very excitingly titled but it does what it says on the tin. The network is being coordinated by Chris Cole

(former director of FoR) and FoR is contributing to the work of the network as one organisation among many. In terms of a central contact point, I would thus refer you to Chris Cole - who can be contacted via his new organisation Figtree http://www.figtree.org.uk/

Chris also maintains an excellent blog on drones which the best source to go to for regular updates on key news items related to drones http://dronewarsuk.wordpress.com/