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Over 60 Killed in U.S. Airstrikes on Suspected Narco-Traffickers as Campaign Expands Across Caribbean and Pacific

U.S. forces launched another lethal strike on a suspected drug-smuggling vessel, prompting the UN human-rights chief to accuse Washington of breaching international law even as Hegseth insists he has “every authorization needed” to act.

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U.S. Marines with the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit conduct live-fire drills aboard the USS Iwo Jima (LHD 7) in the Caribbean Sea, part of a broader SOUTHCOM deployment supporting U.S. counter-narcotics operations. By. SOUTHCOM.

Undeterred by condemnation from senior United Nations officials, the United States announced another lethal airstrike on alleged drug smugglers in the Caribbean Sea.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth made the announcement on Saturday, saying that three people were killed in the strike, the 15th such bombing in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific since the campaign began in September. According to Mr. Hegseth, the targeted vessel “was known by our intelligence to be involved in illicit narcotics smuggling, was transiting along a known narco-trafficking route, and carrying narcotics.” The Secretary of Defense did not disclose which of the designated “narcoterrorist” groups to which those killed were purported to have belonged. In total, at least 64 people have been killed in the strikes.

Even as the United States continues to attack the vessels belonging to alleged narco terrorists in the region, justifying the strikes as necessary to address the flow of drugs into the country, human rights officials have sounded the alarm over a campaign they say violates both American and international law.

A day ahead of the latest airstrike, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk condemned the campaign. He called the attacks “unacceptable” and urged an immediate halt to the practice of “extrajudicial killing.” Mr. Türk also called for transparent, independent investigations into the bombings. “Countering the serious issue of illicit trafficking of drugs across international borders is – as has long been agreed among states – a law-enforcement matter, governed by the careful limits on lethal force set out in international human rights law,” Mr. Türk declared.

As far as the “very sparse information provided publicly by the U.S. authorities, none of the individuals on the targeted boats appeared to pose an imminent threat to lives of others,” he continued. Imminent threat, under international law, is the only condition upon which the intentional use of lethal force is justified.

U.S. officials say the strike is part of a broader “armed conflict” against drug trafficking networks the administration considers akin to terrorism. Hegseth told reporters he had “every authorization needed” for the strikes, pointing to the U.S. Constitution, war-powers authorities, and international law.

Regionally, opposition to the American military strikes has grown. “We do not agree,” said Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, the latest leader to speak out against the campaign. She said that her government has expressed to its U.S. counterpart that “there are international laws on how to operate when dealing with the alleged illegal transport of drugs or guns on international waters.” Meanwhile, fury is growing across Mexico following the assassination of Uruapan Mayor Carlos Manzo, who was fatally shot during a public Day of the Dead celebration on November 1, 2025. Authorities suspect the attack was orchestrated by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG). On Monday, protesters gathered in multiple cities—including Morelia, where demonstrators stormed Michoacán’s Government Palace—demanding justice and greater security.

American lawmakers are increasingly weighing in on the administration’s expanding campaign against drug cartels in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific. While some Democrats and a handful of Republicans have raised concerns over the legal basis and transparency of the recent air and naval strikes, many within Republican circles have voiced strong support, framing the operations as a long-overdue response to cartel-driven violence and narcotics entering U.S. communities. A classified briefing last week reportedly excluded congressional Democrats, a move that drew some bipartisan criticism — with Senator Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) calling the exclusion “unfortunate” — even as other Republicans praised the administration for taking decisive action.

“This should be delivered on a bipartisan basis,” said Senator Rounds. “I don't think any administration should leave out any party from a briefing that level of importance,” said Senator Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.). Even major Trump ally Senator Lindsey Graham noted that “the goal is to brief everybody, not just Republicans.”

During a classified briefing last Thursday for the House Armed Services Committee, Democrats were included, but Pentagon legal advisers who were expected to present were abruptly pulled from the session, according to multiple lawmakers. Representative Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.) described the meeting as ‘incredible for how little information was shared ... and how completely absent any credible legal rationale was for the administration’s unauthorized, ongoing expansion of these strikes.’”

With the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group currently making its way to the theater from the Mediterranean Sea, it is clear that the campaign, ostensibly to address narco-trafficking in the region, is unlikely to end, despite the objections of U.S. and international leaders.

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