

5 June 2018

**OPEN LETTER**

To: Professor Njabulo Ndebele, Chairman of the Board, Nelson Mandela Foundation

Dear Professor Ndebele,

CAGE Africa, a branch of the UK-based CAGE advocacy organisation, is writing this letter to you and the Nelson Mandela Foundation on behalf of the thousands affected by the abuses of the United States ubiquitous and unending 'War on Terror' and in light of the Foundation's surprising decision to invite ex-US President Barack Obama to deliver the 2018 Annual Nelson Mandela Lecture in June.

We appeal to you to withdraw the invitation with immediate effect. The evidence to support such a principled decision is overwhelming: multiple news and independent research reports, ongoing criminal investigations and court cases have linked Obama as the US Commander-in-Chief of the US military between 2009 and 2017 to war crimes, including torture, arbitrary imprisonment and rendition, and extrajudicial killings through indiscriminate drone and air attacks that have killed thousands of innocent civilians, mainly Muslims, in the name of "fighting terrorism".

This is especially pertinent given Nelson Mandela's legacy as an individual who was also once designated a 'terrorist' and suffered torture and imprisonment as a result, and who despite this is now regarded as one of the pre-eminent figureheads for justice around the world.

Withdrawing your invitation would fall in line with the stated aim of the Foundation, which is "living the legacy" of Mandela. Not doing so would cause the reputation of the Foundation to be damaged in the eyes of most supporters around the world. That damage may well tarnish the entire existence of the work done by the Foundation and be the source of severe criticism as it will set a benchmark that principles are sacrificed for expediency, and short term publicity.

The following is a brief outline of some of Obama's policies and their effect on people around the world, but African people in particular:

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## An ongoing, endless war in Africa

During his tenure, Obama increased military involvement in Africa<sup>1</sup> to create an effective war on this continent that is rarely in the news, but which has resulted in terror for African people and destroyed millions of lives. He did this through:

- a 200 percent increase in military missions during his tenure
- increasing defence spending alongside boosting the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in what can only be described as a modern colonial project to further US interests especially regarding access to natural resources like oil
- support for dictators like Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who has been documented as being responsible for unbridled violence against his own people, resulting in the displacement of 2 million in northern Uganda
- leading a NATO regime change operation in Libya resulting in the removal of Qaddafi and the resulting descent of the nation into chaos, setting the atmosphere for ISIS
- a secret campaign in Somalia complete with interrogation chambers, CIA surveillance, and indiscriminate drone attacks

Writes Nick Turse, in his book *Tomorrow's Battlefield: U.S. Proxy Wars and Secret Ops in Africa* (2015), while walking through the refugee camps of Southern Sudan (a country created by the US in an attempt to secure access to oil) alongside Obama:

*"This is the legacy of America's nation-building project in Africa, and of the policies of a president born of an African father, a president whose name was once synonymous with hopes for the future. Over the course of the Obama presidency, American efforts on the continent have become ever more militarized in terms of troops and bases, missions and money. And yet from Libya to the Gulf of Guinea, Mali to this camp in South Sudan, the results have been dismal. Countless military exercises, counterterrorism operations, humanitarian projects, and training missions, backed by billions of dollars of taxpayer money, have all evaporated in the face of coups, civil wars, human rights' abuses, terror attacks and poorly-coordinated aid efforts. The human toll is incalculable. And there appears to be no end in sight."*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://roape.net/2016/12/15/obama-africa-secret-bases-drone-warfare/>

## Drone attacks around the world

Obama, contrary to his peaceable image, conducted 10 times more drone strikes than his predecessor Bush, killing thousands of civilians in Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq and Somalia during his tenure as President. As documented by the Bureau for Investigative Journalism<sup>2</sup>, US so-called “targeted strikes” decimated people at weddings, mosques, funerals – and even schools. A report published in 2011 showed that up until then, under Obama’s tenure, drone strikes ordered by him had killed 56 children<sup>3</sup>. The presence of drones has wrought widespread psychological terror on whole communities, as testified in multiple reports:

*"When children hear the drones, they get really scared, and they can hear them all the time so they're always fearful that the drone is going to attack them ... Because of the noise, we're psychologically disturbed, women, men, and children. ... Twenty-four hours, a person is in stress and there is pain in his head."<sup>4</sup>*

In April 2016, nearing the end of Obama’s tenure, a drone strike targeted Al Nour mosque in Al Daraiyeh, a suburb of Raqqa, Syria, after Friday prayers<sup>5</sup>. The strike killed between 3 and 5 civilians and injuring as many as 30. This is just one incident of many documented atrocities that occurred under Obama’s watch. To this day, over 6000 civilians have been killed by air strikes, both drone and otherwise, by US-led forces in Syria<sup>6</sup>, a merciless bombing campaign initiated by Obama and his administration in 2011.

More pertinently, under Obama, the ‘rules of engagement’ changed for drones strikes, making it easier for the US to mask civilian casualties<sup>7</sup> in areas where they may be

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/obamas-covert-drone-war-in-numbers-ten-times-more-strikes-than-bush>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2011-08-11/over-160-children-reported-among-drone-deaths>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/09/every-person-is-afraid-of-the-drones-the-strikes-effect-on-life-in-pakistan/262814/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://airwars.org/coalitioncivcas2016apr-june/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://airwars.org/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/05/under-obama-men-killed-by-drones-are-presumed-to-be-terrorists/257749/>

contested. The law for strikes changed the definition of “terrorist” into “any military aged male in a combat zone”. This means that individuals who may be walking long distances for food and water – as is often the case in drought-stricken regions like Somalia and Yemen – are easy targets.

This manipulation of the law has severe implications not only for civilians in areas under US occupation, but for all civilians in all areas of the world. It not only absolves the US of accountability for outright murder, but it also ensures that the US is able to act as judge, jury and executioner anywhere in the world that does not bend to its will. This law was enacted under Obama.

Now that the US is in the hands of Donald Trump, these perimeters for killing people have dropped even lower. In the words of Guardian journalist Trevor Timm, “Obama has handed a surveillance state and war machine to a maniac”<sup>8</sup>. Obama quite simply must not be allowed to escape accountability for this, let alone be given a platform to speak at an organisation proclaiming to champion the human rights legacy of Mandela.

### **Atrocities in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantanamo Bay**

Late last year, Fatou Bensouda, the Hague-based prosecutor of the ICC announced<sup>9</sup> that all the requirements under the Rome Statute had been met and that she was ordering an investigation into war crimes committed by, among others, the US military in Afghanistan from 2002, throughout Obama’s term of office up until the present day.

These crimes, according to documented reports, include claims of torture, arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings, and the condoning of child rape by Afghan soldiers. According to a New York Times report, by 2015 rape of young boys by Afghan soldiers was “rampant”. When some US soldiers complained to their seniors, they “had their careers ruined by their superiors, who had encouraged them to ignore the practice”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/09/president-trump-national-security-nuclear-arsenal>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/us-uk-war-crimes-afghanistan-investigation-icc-criminal-court-hague-latest-a8035576.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/23/world/asia/afghanistan-military-abuse.html>

The line of command for these atrocities ends with the Commander-in-Chief of the occupying power, Barack Obama.

Countless atrocities took place in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, among them claims and photos alleging in 2015 that US soldiers had raped young boys in front of their mothers<sup>11</sup>. The alleged perpetrators of these heinous crimes were then protected by Obama, and the matter quickly dealt with internally with no resolution offered to the victims or public. When other photos emerged depicting the rape of boys with pipes and wires, he blocked their release, saying they would “inflamm anti-American public opinion and put our troops in greater danger”<sup>12</sup>. Again, no compensation to victims or their families was forthcoming.

Given our history of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and the acknowledgement of the dire need for victims of abuse to be compensated and their stories heard in order for them and their communities to properly heal, surely you would agree that such incidents need to be investigated and justly dealt with, and the honour of performing the Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture should most definitely not be bestowed upon the Commander-in-Chief who effectively sanctioned this abuse, as well as the entire programme of torture at the heart of the ‘War on Terror’.

Obama’s responsibility for abuse that occurred at Guantanamo Bay prison, of which there is much public documentation but no accountability for perpetrators, also merits a mention. In fact, Obama’s administration ensured that much of the Senate Report on Torture was censored and later buried, and the names of the perpetrators removed.

These perpetrators still exist in the US government and in fact one of them, Gina Haskell, has now been appointed head of the CIA. Here is an individual who oversaw and covered up the torture of Muslims in horrific “black sites” in Thailand - this treatment is documented to have included smashing heads against walls, prolonged periods of hanging, and confinement in coffin-like boxes. It is none other than Obama and his administration who created the enabling environment in which such individuals are now able to ascend to power under the eyes of Trump.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAh0G1hW7So>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/5395830/Abu-Ghraib-abuse-photos-show-rape.html>

In addition to condoning a global programme of torture, Obama also signed off on hundreds of renditions, many of them taking place here on the African continent, and particularly from the region of his birthplace in East Africa<sup>13</sup> – “rendition” is no more than a euphemism for the international kidnapping of “terrorism” suspects, many of whom since have been later found to be innocent but who have suffered unimaginable abuse or even death in detention, simply for their social justice activism or, in some cases, practising their faith.

### Setting a new low moral standard

Barack Obama, despite the world’s high hopes for him, rather than being the champion of human rights as he will no doubt cast himself to be during his upcoming lecture as your guest, has in fact ensured that the United States has set an *unacceptable low moral standard* when it comes to human rights and the dignity of local populations globally.

Rather he and his supporters have cultivated a new kind of colonialism in the name of the ‘War on Terror’, spreading fear, violence and destruction in particular among Muslim communities, through rubber-stamping over 100 military actions a day throughout Africa<sup>14</sup>.

This violent approach has been replicated to appalling effect by many leaders on this continent and elsewhere, ensuring that there is now a network of prisons around the world where the torture, killing and intimidation of predominantly Muslims is sanctioned and practiced with unbridled relish, all in the name of the ‘War on Terror’.

But this is not a ‘war’ – it is an invasion, an occupation.

Giving this man a platform would be tantamount to condoning the commission of the international crimes linked to him and his administration, as well as aiding and abetting in the masquerade and veneer of respectability that the US administration creates

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<sup>13</sup> [https://www.therenditionproject.org.uk/pdf/PDF%2046%20\[CP-2010-04-REP%20The%20Horn%20of%20Africa%20Inquisition\].pdf](https://www.therenditionproject.org.uk/pdf/PDF%2046%20[CP-2010-04-REP%20The%20Horn%20of%20Africa%20Inquisition].pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [https://news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/ny3w/the-u-s-is-waging-a-massive-shadow-war-in-africa-exclusive-documents-reveal](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/ny3w/the-u-s-is-waging-a-massive-shadow-war-in-africa-exclusive-documents-reveal)

around its Presidents and military Commander-in-Chiefs, despite ongoing, brazen and well-documented human rights violations around the world.

Obama himself has even conceded that he took the lives of innocents and yet neither he nor his administration has taken a step to apologise or compensate the victims of his army's killing sprees, torture programme or rendition networks. None of them have been held accountable. Such arrogance is reminiscent of our apartheid abusers, and your Foundation surely cannot condone this.

Vast numbers of these nameless people now reside in abject poverty, political vacuum and occupation, harrowing conflict, and desperation. Obama has trivialised these devastating effects as "collateral damage", a gross manipulation of language and heinous attempt to evade accountability and cover the truth.

Should the Nelson Mandela Foundation go ahead with their attempts to salute and honour an individual who admits to feeling "haunted" by the lives of the innocents he has taken, and yet jokes about drones, outrageously and arrogantly warning possible suitors from his daughters by stating: "I have one word for you: Predator drones. You'll never see them coming", we will continue to campaign against the lecture and the presence of Obama in South Africa. It will also cast the Foundation in a highly unfavourable light both among many Muslims and other key members of our civil society.

However, we also assure you that should you decide to act on the side of truth, justice and human rights, and withdraw the invitation, you will have our full support, and no doubt the full support of all right-thinking individuals the world over.

Signed:

CAGE AFRICA members and supporters

**About CAGE:** CAGE campaigns for the rights of Muslims and others adversely affected by abuses of the rule of law as part of the 'War on Terror'. We campaign for a world free from oppression and injustice. Our website is <https://cage.ngo>.