

Computerized War Crimes: CIA used pirated, inaccurate software to target drone attacks

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‘They want to kill people with my software that doesn’t work,’ software exec tells court

The CIA used illegally pirated software to direct Predator drone attacks, despite apparently knowing the software was inaccurate, according to documents in an intellectual property lawsuit.

The lawsuit, working its way through a Massachusetts court, alleges that the CIA purchased a pirated and inaccurate version of a location analysis program, which may have incorrectly located targets by as much as 42 feet.

The allegation raises fresh questions about the CIA’s execution of drone attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are believed to have killed hundreds of civilians in the past four years.

And if the court decides to grant an injunction against users of the software, it could potentially halt the CIA’s drone attacks, at least temporarily, as the agency works to find a replacement.

According to IISI, Netezza reverse-engineered a location analysis program called Geospatial and installed it on its own hardware, which it then sold to the CIA. Netezza had contracted IISI to build the software, but decided to create its own unauthorized version after the project suffered delays, the lawsuit alleges.

The CIA accepted the pirated software despite reportedly knowing it “produced locations inaccurate by up to 13 metres (42.6 feet),” reports The Register.

In a sworn deposition, IISI chief technical officer Richard Zimmerman said a Netezza executive pressured him to deliver the product before it was ready and told him it was their “patriotic duty” to build location software for CIA-operated drones.

Another Netezza executive reportedly asserted that the CIA would accept flawed software. “My reaction was one of stun, amazement that they want to kill people with my software that doesn’t work,” Zimmerman said.

According to court documents, Netezza delivered its reverse-engineered software to the CIA in 2009.

“The potential for a software malfunction to cause serious havoc with an unmanned aerial

vehicle, such as a Predator Drone, is no longer a matter of pure theory,” writes Bill Conroy at NarcoNews. “Last month a Navy drone entered the airspace of the nation’s Capitol after being out of control for a half hour due to what the Navy called a ‘software issue.’

“If the CIA is using flawed software re-engineered by Netezza ‘to target predator drones in Afghanistan,’ as IISI’s pleadings in the lawsuit assert, then it is likely only a matter of time before innocent lives are compromised due to a ‘software issue.’ In that sense, IISI’s motion for a preliminary injunction, if successful, could be seen as a lifesaver,” Conroy argues.

Last year, the New American Foundation estimated that Predator drones killed 750 to 1,000 people in Pakistan between 2006 and 2009. About one third — an estimated 320 people — were believed to be civilians.

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