



Eyes in sky: FBI using drones for surveillance, but critics fret over privacy

By Matthew Rusling - June 22rd, 2013

WASHINGTON -- With the U.S. government's admission this week of the use of drones for surveillance on U.S. soil, civil liberty advocates fret that Americans' right to privacy could be endangered.

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) chief Robert Mueller told the U.S. Congress on Wednesday that his agency has used drones on U.S. soil for surveillance in a "very, very minimal way."

Law enforcement has argued that drone technology can be used to improve police efficiency -- and even save lives in the process, as drones could help catch criminals, survey drug traffickers, search densely-wooded areas for murder victims, and manage traffic after an accident.

Indeed, drones were used for surveillance earlier this year in a standoff in the U.S. state of Alabama between police and a gunman holding a 5-year-old hostage.

But privacy advocates worry that clouding the skies with armies of drones could lead to an unprecedented intrusion on the everyday lives of Americans.

The American Civil Liberties Union has expressed reservations over the government use of drones domestically, and has outlined a number of scenarios including the possible use of drones for crowd control without the presence of officers, which could spur a rash of unintended consequences.

"While drones can serve valid purposes, like monitoring forest fires, surveying land and search-and-rescue missions, they pose a threat to our freedoms," Cato Institute analyst Malou Innocent told Xinhua in a recent interview.

In a scene that resembles a sci-fi film, the Electronic Privacy Information Center explains that enhanced drone technology is capable of "peering inside high-level windows, and through solid barriers, such as fences, trees, and even walls," noted Innocent.

Drones could also move from surveillance to offensive action, she added.

The hefty price tag on an airplane or helicopter has in the past limited the ability of local law enforcement to conduct surveillance, especially in smaller municipalities with limited funding.

But drones are relatively inexpensive and can remain in the sky 24/7 for months in some cases. They can also be equipped with night vision, allowing them to hover overhead and keep watch all hours of the night.

The U.S. military has honed drone technology over the last decade in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and touts the aircraft's ability to provide eyes and firepower in the sky without endangering the life of the pilot, who usually sits safely in a command-and-control center on the ground.

Unmanned aircraft have surveyed and targeted alleged terrorists in those war-torn countries, as well as in the vast swath of territory on the Afghan-Pakistani border, where key members of al-Qaeda are believed to be holed up.

Innocent also added that one option to limit privacy infringement is to eliminate federal grants that subsidize drones for police departments. Another is to mandate that police should obtain a warrant in circumstances where drones can surveil a private residence or anywhere else citizens have a reasonable expectation of privacy.

Clay Ramsay, director of research at Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, said that the concept of privacy is evolving in the United States, with technological pioneers like Facebook allowing users to create their own public profile that is accessible worldwide.

"Society is always evolving, privacy is always evolving," Ramsay told Xinhua.

Still, it is likely that the majority of Americans would be uncomfortable about a drone hovering overhead and watching their every move, he said.