

28 May 2025

English only

Human Rights Council
Fifty-ninth session**“They are hunting us”: systematic drone attacks targeting civilians in Kherson****Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine***Summary*

In the present conference room paper, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine concludes that Russian armed forces have committed the crimes against humanity of murder and the war crimes of attacking civilians, through a months-long pattern of drone attacks targeting civilians on the right bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Province, in Ukraine. It also found that these acts were committed with the primary purpose to spread terror among the civilian population, in violation of international humanitarian law.

Since July 2024, Russian military drone operators based on the opposite side of the river have systematically struck civilian persons, in various circumstances, mainly outdoors, while on foot or using transport. They also targeted ambulances, which have special protection under international humanitarian law, often preventing them from reaching the victims.

The Commission documented drone attacks against civilians in Kherson city and 16 other localities stretching over 100 kilometres in river front areas under Ukrainian Government control. The attacks are continuing at the time of the publication of this paper. So far, almost 150 civilians have been killed and hundreds more have been injured, according to official sources.

In its investigations, the Commission interviewed over 90 residents of the affected areas in Kherson Province, including victims and witnesses, geolocated over 120 publicly disseminated videos of attacks, collected official documents, and reviewed hundreds of additional videos and text posts available on open sources.

The perpetrators used civilian drones, widely commercially available, that they weaponized to drop explosives on targets. They also used suicide drones that explode upon impact. The drone operators are able to track and aim at targets remotely via an embedded camera.

Several Russian Telegram channels with links to the perpetrating military units, some of them with thousands of followers, have disseminated hundreds of videos of the attacks from the original feeds of the drones. The footage posted shows that the perpetrators could clearly see the victims and leaves no doubt that they intended to target civilians. The same Telegram channels have regularly uploaded threatening text announcing further attacks in a wide geographic area, to which they refer as a “red zone”.

The individual drone attacks amount to the war crimes of intentionally directing attacks against civilians. The recurrence of these attacks for over 10 months, against multiple civilian targets and in a wide geographic area, demonstrates that they are widespread and

systematic and have been planned and organised, requiring the mobilisation and allocation of necessary resources. These and other elements led the Commission to conclude that Russian armed forces carried out drone attacks targeting civilians pursuant to an organisational policy and committed murder as a crime against humanity.

The Commission further found that Russian armed forces and those supporting them have committed acts or threats of violence for the primary purpose to spread terror among the civilian population in the targeted areas of Kherson Province, in violation of international humanitarian law. The nature and broad range of the attacks, their specific civilian targets, their frequency, intensity, geographic spread, the circumstances in which they occur, have led to pervasive fear within the population. The public dissemination of videos of attacks and threatening text announcing further attacks in the above-mentioned area referred to as a “red zone”, have exacerbated the fear of the population. A resident of Kherson Province who witnessed eight drone attacks stated “they want to inflict horror on the city”. The posting on Russian Telegram channels of videos of civilians being killed and injured amounts to the war crime of outrages upon personal dignity.

In the Commission’s view, the conduct of the perpetrators may amount to the crime against humanity of forcible transfer of population. The widespread and systematic character of the attacks, the terror instilled within the population, and the ensuing coercive environment, have compelled thousands to flee. In addition to attacking civilian persons, drones have repeatedly targeted civilian objects and infrastructure, all means of transport, and emergency and rescue services. The damage and destruction of houses, the absence or limitation of services, essential infrastructure, and transport, have rendered the affected areas unliveable and left many residents with no other choice than to seek safer locations. These elements combined suggest a coordinated state policy, on the part of the Russian authorities, to force the population to leave.

The Commission also examined allegations by Russian authorities of drone attacks by Ukrainian armed forces against civilian targets in Kherson Province. However, it was unable to corroborate them because of lack of cooperation by Russian authorities.

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 49/1,¹ adopted on 4 March 2022, the Human Rights Council decided to urgently establish an Independent International Commission of Inquiry to investigate alleged violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law, and related crimes in the context of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. The Commission's mandate was most recently extended on 4 April 2025.² It is composed of Erik Møse (Chair), Pablo de Greiff, and Vrinda Grover.
2. In all aspects of its work, the Commission is guided by the principles of independence, impartiality, objectivity, and integrity. It adopts a victim-centred approach and a strict respect of the "do no harm" principle, in particular regarding guarantees of confidentiality of the information received and the safety and the protection of victims and witnesses, and other interlocutors.
3. In the context of the situation in Kherson city and other localities on the right bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Province, where recurrent drone attacks against civilians by Russian armed forces have been going on for months, the Commission is presenting a special report on this matter. It has interviewed 91 persons from the areas affected by attacks (43 women and 48 men). Interlocutors included victims, witnesses, local authorities, medical personnel, and humanitarian workers. The Commission has examined over 300 publicly available videos of attacks, of which it has geolocated 124, as well as over 600 text posts on Telegram channels. During its investigations, the Commission has identified victims of the attacks shown in these videos and interviewed them as well as witnesses. It has also collected relevant documents, including death certificates and medical reports.
4. The Commission also examined allegations, as reported by Russian authorities,³ of drone attacks by Ukrainian armed forces against civilian targets in Kherson Province. Such claims could not be corroborated because of lack of information and access due to the absence of cooperation by Russian authorities.
5. The Commission expresses its gratitude to all those who shared their experiences, testimonies and other valuable information. It appreciates the cooperation of the Government of Ukraine. The Russian Federation continued not to recognise the Commission and did not respond to any of the Commission's questions concerning drone attacks.

II. Military and political context

6. Kherson was the first major city captured by Russian armed forces in the early stages of the 2022 full-scale invasion. On 30 September 2022, the Russian Federation unilaterally declared the annexation of Kherson Province, together with Donetsk, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia provinces. This is illegal under international law.⁴ Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation, subsequently signed a Constitutional Law on the Accession of the Kherson Region to the Russian Federation.⁵ On 11 November 2022, a Ukrainian armed forces counteroffensive retaken control of Kherson city and the surrounding area on the right bank of the Dnipro River (see map, figure 1). The Russian armed forces and the Russian civil administration, which had been set up in Kherson city, withdrew to the left bank. Since then, both armed forces have conducted ground, air or riverine military operations from opposite sides of the river, including with drones. Localities in the area have experienced shelling and drone attacks.⁶

¹ A/HRC/RES/49/1.

² A/HRC/RES/58/24.

³ See for example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Briefing by Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova", 24 April 2025.

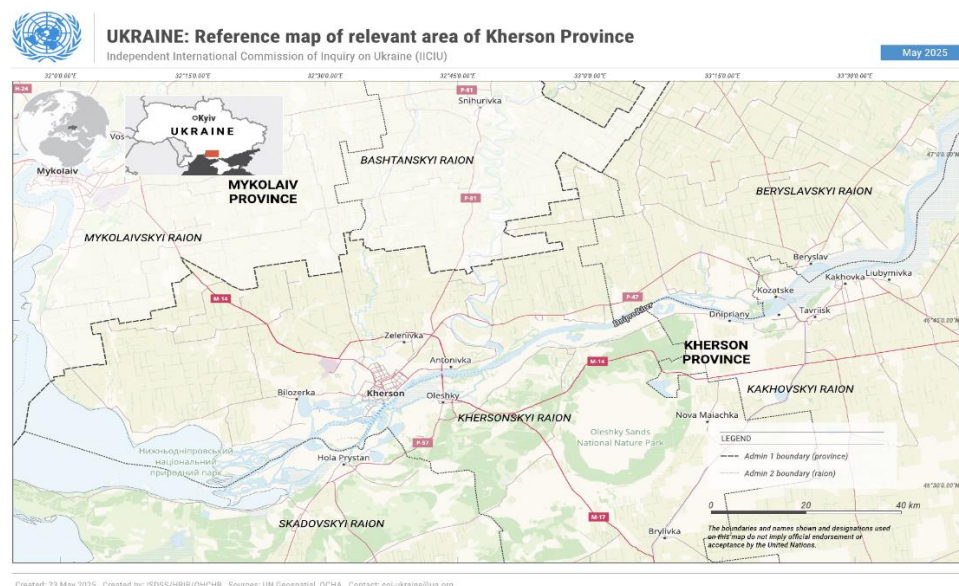
⁴ A/HRC/52/CRP.4, paras. 674-691.

⁵ Official website of the President of the Russian Federation, "Federal Constitutional Law on the Accession of the Kherson Region to the Russian Federation and the Establishment of a New Constituent Entity of the Russian Federation, the Kherson Region", 5 October 2022.

⁶ A/78/540, paras. 19, 36-39.

7. Despite the loss of the provincial capital, on 11 November 2022, Dmitry Peskov, the Spokesperson of the President of the Russian Federation, in response to a question of the press on whether the withdrawal of Russian troops meant that Kherson city will no longer be the administrative centre of the province, declared, “Other decisions have not been taken”.⁷ Concerning Kherson Province, he noted, “This is a constituent entity of the Russian Federation, this is a status given and strengthened by law. There can be no changes here.”⁸ The Russian Federation has consistently reiterated its claims to the entirety of the Kherson Province, as well as to the other three illegally annexed provinces, referring to the so-called referendums which the Russian Federation held in the occupied territories of the four Ukrainian provinces in violation of international humanitarian law in 2022.⁹ On 14 June 2024, the President of the Russian Federation declared, “The residents of Kherson and Zaporozhye have expressed their position in referendums, and Kherson and Zaporozhye regions, as well as the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics, have become part of the Russian Federation. And there can be no talk of disturbing our state unity. The people’s will to be with Russia shall be inviolable. This matter is closed forever and is no longer a matter for discussion.”¹⁰

Figure 1. Map of the relevant area in Kherson province



III. Overview

8. Drones of various types have been used extensively against military targets by both parties during the armed conflict in Ukraine. Starting from July 2024, Russian armed forces systematically attacked civilians with drones in Kherson city and other localities on the Ukrainian-controlled right bank of Dniro River, in Kherson Province.¹¹ They targeted civilian persons, in various circumstances, mainly when they were outdoors, both on foot or

⁷ See TASS, “Peskov: Kherson remains the administrative center of the Kherson region after the withdrawal of Russian troops”, 15 November 2022.

⁸ Interfax, “Peskov: Kherson region remains a subject of the Russian Federation, there are no changes in this status”, 11 November.

⁹ A/HRC/52/CRP.4, paras. 671 and 674-691.

¹⁰ Official website of the President of the Russian Federation, “Meeting with Foreign Ministry senior officials”, 14 June 2024.

¹¹ On 13 August 2024, Oleksander Prokudin, Governor of Kherson Province, posted the following text on his official Telegram channel, “Over the past thirty days, almost every second victim of Russian aggression in the Kherson region has suffered from Russian drone strikes. During this period, Russian troops attacked our region about 3300 times with drones. Unfortunately, seven people died, 110 adults and two children were injured.” (Telegram message available in Ukrainian only). Sporadic drone attacks affecting civilians and civilian objects in Kherson Province had already been reported before July 2024.

while using any type of vehicles; they also targeted ambulances. These attacks have resulted in the death and injury of men, women, and children, mostly men, and have also led to psychological trauma and fear.¹²

9. Such attacks became part of the daily lives of the residents of Kherson city and other river front localities of Kherson Province. The area affected stretches across more than 100 kilometres along the right bank of Dnipro River. The frequency and the geographic spread of the drone attacks intensified during autumn 2024. They were still continuing at the time of the publication of this paper. Residents saw or heard the drones flying in from the other side of the river, where the Russian armed forces are based. In the incidents investigated, the targets were visibly civilian and no military personnel or equipment were identified at the times and locations of the attacks.

10. During these attacks, Russian armed forces mostly used civilian drones that are widely commercially available, after modifying them into weaponized drones. The weaponized versions of these drones allow their operators, via an embedded camera, to remotely track, aim, and drop explosives on targets. They can return to their point of origin to be reused. Occasionally, perpetrators employed suicide drones that are also equipped with cameras but that explode upon impact on their targets.

11. Several Russian Telegram channels have played an instrumental role in supporting the acts of the perpetrators and in enhancing their effects. Such channels have regularly disseminated video footage recorded by the attacking drones, as well as text with dismissive or violent comments and threats of further attacks. One officially registered Telegram channel, with thousands of followers, has been uploading such material on a daily basis for months. Other channels have shared similar content. These Telegram channels have been linked to military units implicated in the attacks. The video footage that they posted displays the attacks and the resulting death, injury, damage, or destruction, and is styled like video games, often accompanied by background music and threatening text. In hundreds of videos reviewed by the Commission, it is evident that the perpetrators had a good visibility of targets and were thus aware of their civilian character. They nevertheless proceeded with the attacks, which demonstrates their intentional character.

12. Many victims of drone attacks described how drones suddenly appeared overhead, chased them, at times over long distances, and dropped explosives on them. In November 2024, a 40-year-old employee of a Kherson city hospital was killed by an explosive dropped by drone on her car as she was arriving at work. Her husband was injured in this blast. In January 2025, a 47-year-old woman from Antonivka settlement told the Commission that during that month, she was walking her dog in the street and suddenly saw two drones approaching. She tried to hide under a bush, but the drones nevertheless dropped two explosives that landed to her left and right, causing a concussion, as well as shrapnel wounds.

13. The number, frequency, intensity, and geographic spread of the drone attacks against civilians, as well as the permanent threat of further attacks, have spread terror among the population living in the affected areas. Residents described feeling constant fear that any movement outdoors involves serious safety risks. A victim of a drone attack said, *"Their task is to terrorize us, to break us"*. Russian Telegram channels have, for months, posted text exhorting the population to leave the area. Local authorities and multiple interlocutors reported a stark decrease of the population as a direct consequence of the attacks. The permanent danger, the climate of terror, the damage and destruction of civilian objects, the resulting reduction of essential services, have all rendered life in the affected areas unbearable. Many felt they had no other choice than to relocate to safer areas. A resident of Antonivka settlement told the Commission, *"Drones were attacking everything: minibuses, cars, pedestrians etc... every time you went out of the house, you had to check the sky and look out for a buzzing sound and, in any case, run."* He left the area, because of the increase of drone attacks.

¹² According to the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, from June 2024 to 10 March 2025, 146 civilians have been killed and 1,405 injured as a result of the drone attacks in Kherson and Beryslav Districts of Kherson Province.

IV. Widespread and systematic attacks

“There are currently daily attacks, drones attack everyone and everything, people on foot, on their bicycle, on cars.”

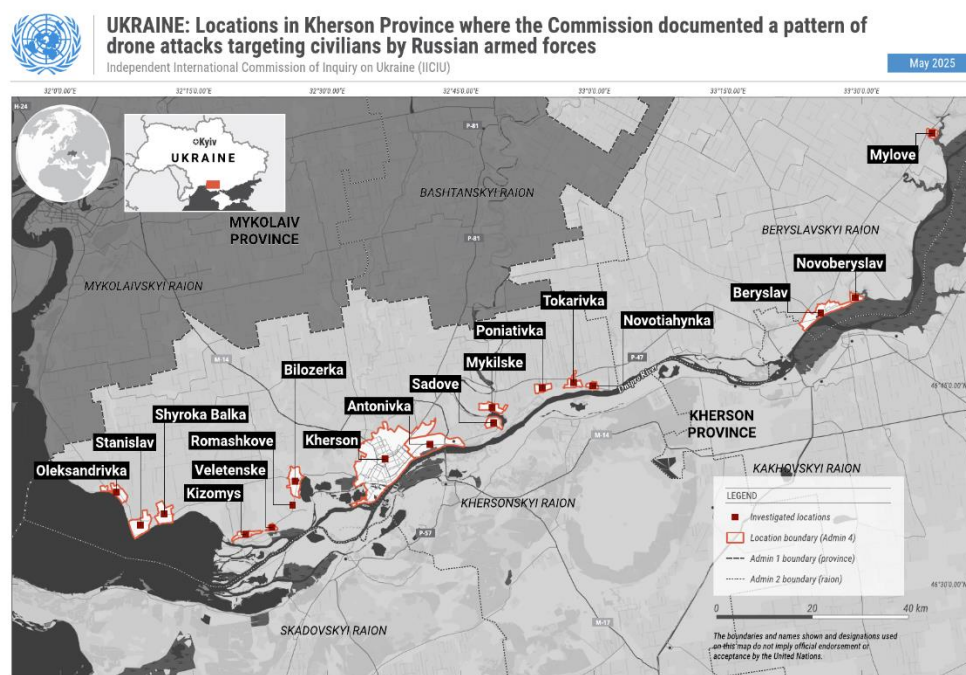
Local authority from Kherson Province, 20 February 2025

14. For months, the Russian armed forces on the left bank of the Dnipro River have carried out drone attacks in localities on the right bank of the river. Civilians were hit while they carried out daily life activities, mainly outdoors, near their homes, as they were walking or standing in the street, going or returning from work, visiting relatives, waiting for the bus, or travelling by bicycle or motorcycle. They also targeted various types of vehicles, stationed or on the move, public transport, as well as ambulances and fire trucks. Almost 150 civilians have been killed and hundreds more injured as a result of the attacks, including men, women, and children, mostly men. Many of the victims were older persons with reduced mobility, who had difficulties in escaping pursuit by a drone. Survivors suffered from grave injuries, at times leading to amputations, cuts, and concussions. Limitations in the response of emergency services due to the constant risk of attacks have aggravated the situation of those injured, and in some cases led to death.

15. The attacks were committed in areas stretching over more than 100 kilometres along the right bank of the Dnipro River, in the part of Kherson Province that remains under Ukrainian control. The area comprises multiple urban and rural settlements. The Commission found such incidents in Kherson city and 16 additional localities (see map, figure 2). The number of victims targeted and the span of the area affected demonstrate that the attacks have been widespread.

16. For over ten months, the drone attacks have been carried out recurrently. Residents reported attacks occurring daily, even several times a day. According to them, everyone in the area knows someone who has been targeted by a drone, and some persons or objects have been attacked several times. Most of the attacks occurred during daylight, when visibility was good, leaving no possible doubt as to the nature of the target. The deliberate and regular repetition of this criminal conduct, using the same methods, over a prolonged period of time, demonstrates its systematic character.

Figure 2. Map of documented pattern of drone attacks, Kherson province



V. Videos and text posts on Russian Telegram channels

“Kherson. Red zone. Civilians did not yet understand that they do not have long to live with such an approach to security. But everyone choses when and where to die at war.”

Post on a Russian Telegram channel, 3 February 2025

17. The widespread and systematic character of the attacks is further demonstrated by the daily dissemination of videos of attacks and threatening texts on some Russian Telegram channels. The content of the videos is such that it could have only come from the original feed of the attacking drones. They show how drones chase civilians and drop explosives on them, causing injury or death. One of the Telegram channels which uploads such material has over 50,000 followers and has been officially registered in the Russian Federation. It has been posting videos of attacks and accompanying threatening text virtually every day since the end of August 2024. Several other channels have disseminated similar posts. These Telegram channels appear to be operated by the perpetrating military units or persons closely related to them (see para. 49).

18. An analysis of hundreds of videos of attacks shows that perpetrators had a good visibility of the targets at the time of the attacks. In the samples reviewed by the Commission, a remote pilot can see via the drone’s camera, in real time, select targets, and release one or several explosives on them. Occasionally, suicide drones with similar camera features but that explode upon impact have also been employed. In the videos documented by the Commission, the targets were visibly civilian. The drones nevertheless chased and struck them, demonstrating that the attacks on civilians were deliberate.

19. These Telegram channels posted text – accompanying the videos or as separate posts – that announced attacks over a broad geographic area. The text was often titled, *“Kherson. Red zone”*, referring to the area targeted by attacks. Some posts displayed a map of about 45.5 square kilometres coloured in red. On 6 October 2024, a post with a map stated, *“Residents of this locality, which is marked as a red zone on the map, in these areas our teams will destroy any transport – this is one of our primary objectives. [...]”*. Such threatening texts have been reposted regularly. The area affected by attacks is even larger than the one indicated on the map, which further demonstrates their widespread character.

20. The recurrent dissemination of the above-described videos with violent and disturbing content, generated by the drones, and of text with threats of further attacks, demonstrate the intent of the perpetrators and those associated with them, to kill or harm civilians, as well as to spread fear and alarm among the population. For instance, a 30 July 2024 post on Telegram stated, *“[...] Civilians moving within the red zone do so at their own risk, by definition, any movement is a target [sic] [...]”*. A video disseminated on 15 September 2024, showed an explosive being dropped on a person dressed in civilian clothes, with the accompanying text, *“[...] Mission accomplished. Target hit.”* On 1 December 2024, a post with a video of a drone attack on three civilians repairing a roof, noted *“Once again. Everything that moves will be destroyed. [...]”* Similar posts have been published regularly.

VI. Case descriptions

21. The examples and incidents outlined in this paper focus on attacks on civilian persons and various forms of civilian transport, as well as ambulances. They are only a small sample of the incidents examined by the Commission.

Attacks targeting civilian persons outdoors

22. The drone attacks targeted civilian persons around their houses, on the street, or when they travelled by bicycles or motorcycles. A man from Kherson city described that in August 2024, he was in the courtyard of his building together with his 54-year-old neighbour and heard the sound of a drone. He immediately ran into the building. The drone dropped an explosive, fatally injuring his neighbour, who had not managed to get inside. An older woman with low mobility was sitting in the yard at that time and was also injured.

23. A woman from Poniativka village recounted that in September 2024, she was walking home with her 54-year-old husband and suddenly heard a drone. It was already above their heads and immediately dropped an explosive, giving them no time to seek shelter. Both were injured. Her husband suffered from intense bleeding and died before an ambulance arrived, with significant delay, due to the danger of drone attacks. The woman said, *“My husband died in my arms, bleeding to death, because the ambulance did not arrive on time. I tried to stop the bleeding with a T-shirt, but it was not enough. [...]”*.

24. A 23-year-old woman stated that in September 2024, she was biking from Antonivka settlement to the centre of Kherson city and noticed a drone following her. She tried to escape, but the drone dropped an explosive in her proximity, injuring her leg. A video of the attack was posted on a Telegram channel with the text, *“[...] This individual has been eliminated with precision. [...]”* It further stated that the person was “for now” severely injured, yet the rescue services were not allowed to approach, with a smiley face.

25. A woman from Antonivka settlement told the Commission that in December 2024, her 67-year-old husband went outside with his bicycle and was killed by a drone, just 100 meters away from their house. Her neighbours came to tell her that her husband was lying, dead, on the street. She rushed out, recognised him, and stressed, *“I stayed with my husband’s body from 9:30 am until 4 pm, where he was killed. He was lying face down with a hole to his head. [...]”*. At least twice during that time, she had to take refuge in the neighbours’ premises due to approaching drones. The morgue services managed to come only at 4 pm.

26. A 33-year-old man from Kherson city told the Commission that in January 2025, he was walking on the street and saw a drone following him. He hid under a tree. The drone stopped above him. He managed to jump to the side just before the drone dropped an explosive that caused five serious injuries in his leg. He required hospitalisation and continues to suffer from the consequences of the attack (see Telegram post, figure 3).

Figure 3. Post on Russian Telegram channel, 11 January 2025



The sequence of screenshots from a video published in this post shows a drone dropping an explosive near the civilian man, in a street of Kherson city (see para. 26)

Attacks targeting civilian cars

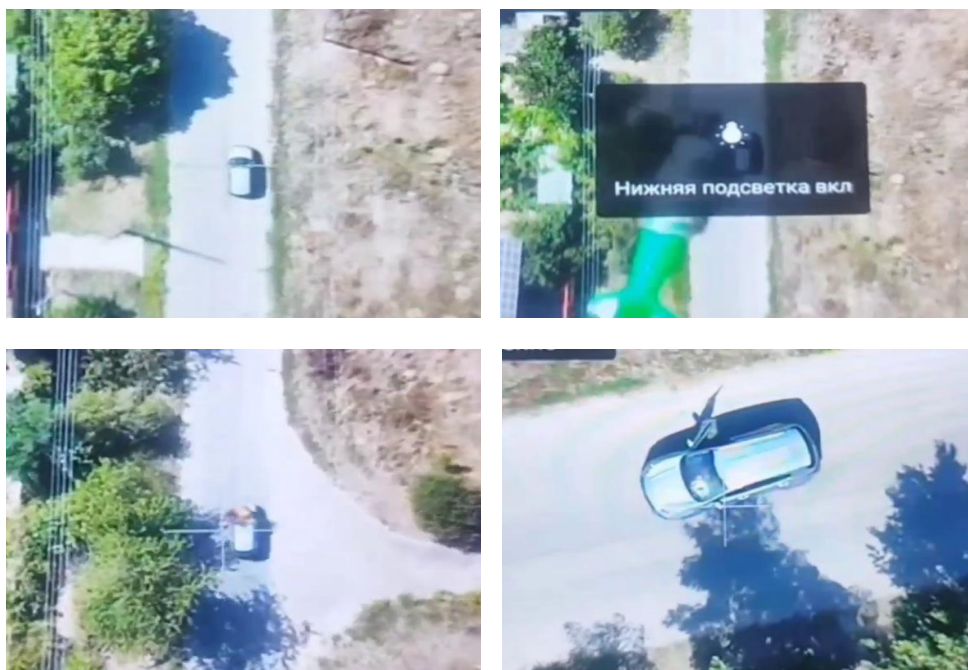
27. A large number of drone attacks have targeted all types of civilian cars on the move, often leading to the killing or injury of their drivers and passengers. In some of the incidents, drone operators waited for the cars to stop and the passengers to open the doors before dropping the explosive. This likely augmented the lethal effect of the blast. Videos of such attacks have often been disseminated by Telegram channels with the generic message, *“[...] Any transport in the red zone is a legitimate target.”*

28. A 63-year-old man from Antonivka settlement told the Commission that in August 2024, he was hit by an explosive dropped from a drone as he stepped out of his vehicle. He was injured and suffered from severe complications to his leg. After 30 days of hospitalisation and three surgeries, he had still not fully recovered and received disability status. A video of the attack was posted online, reiterating the above-mentioned message.

29. A 60-year-old man stated that in August 2024, he was driving through Poniativka village to distribute humanitarian aid and saw a drone dropping an explosive on his car. He fainted as a consequence of the blast. After regaining consciousness, he noticed that he could not hear but managed to drive to his home village to seek help. He fainted again upon reaching the village. He had a concussion, needed hospitalisation and surgery to his ear, and suffered from hearing impairment.

30. A woman from Kherson city recounted that in September 2024, she was driving together with her 60-year-old husband through Antonivka settlement when a drone hit their vehicle. Her husband died and she lost an eye as a result of the strike (see Telegram post, figure 4).

Figure 4. Post on Russian Telegram channel, 2 September 2024



The sequence of screenshots from a video published in this post shows the drone dropping an explosive on the civilian vehicle in Antonivka settlement (see para.30).

Attacks targeting public transport

31. Drones were also used to target public transport, including buses, minibuses, and taxis, which led to civilian deaths and injuries. Footage of such attacks has been disseminated on Telegram channels, often with the text, “Any transport in the red zone will be considered a legitimate target” (see similarly para. 27).

32. A 61-year-old woman from Poniativka village stated that in September 2024, she heard drones flying overhead when she was waiting at a bus stop. A minibus arrived, and as she was stepping in, the drone dropped an explosive that fell nearby and injured her. She suffered two fractures and needed hospitalisation.

33. A woman from Kherson city reported that in December 2024, her 41-year-old friend was killed by a drone strike on a minibus. This was confirmed in a message posted by the Governor of Kherson Province.

34. The Commission has examined and geolocated other videos, disseminated by Russian Telegram channels, of drone attacks targeting passenger buses as they were moving. For instance, in September 2024, a Telegram channel released a video showing a drone dropping

an explosive that detonated near the front right side of a bus. It came with the text, “*Our hunters have been working since early morning*”. In October 2024, the same channel posted a video of a drone releasing an explosive on a bus and noted, “*Today another smart guy decided to slip through on a bus near the hunters. Target hit*”. In November 2024, a Telegram channel posted a video of a drone dropping an explosive hitting the middle of the roof of a bus. In January 2025, another video shows a drone releasing an explosive on a bus.

35. The drone attacks also targeted taxis. The Commission documented several videos of attacks on civilian cars, released in August, September, and October 2024, that were posted with texts stating that taxis will be targeted, or which included threatening comments concerning taxi drivers. A post uploaded on a Russian Telegram on 30 August 2024 displayed a video of an attack on a civilian car and the text, “Another “taxi driver” who will not be finishing any more rides”. A post uploaded on 4 October 2024, showing a drone strike on a car, came with the text, “We gonna kill 'em all those taxi drivers, they ain't normal, to hell with them”

Attacks on ambulances

36. Perpetrators also used drones to target ambulances, which have special protection under international humanitarian law.¹³ As a result of attacks, ambulances could not effectively serve the most affected areas and were sometimes unable to promptly assist persons in dire need.

37. A 50-year-old woman from Veletenske village stated that in October 2024, after she had been injured during the shelling of her neighbourhood and was losing a lot of blood, an ambulance came but was unable to help her as it had been hit by a drone. A second ambulance arrived later. She then saw one more drone that flew above her. It dropped an explosive near her and missed and dropped another explosive on the front of the ambulance, which caught fire. The woman saw how a nurse managed to escape, but the driver burnt in the ambulance.

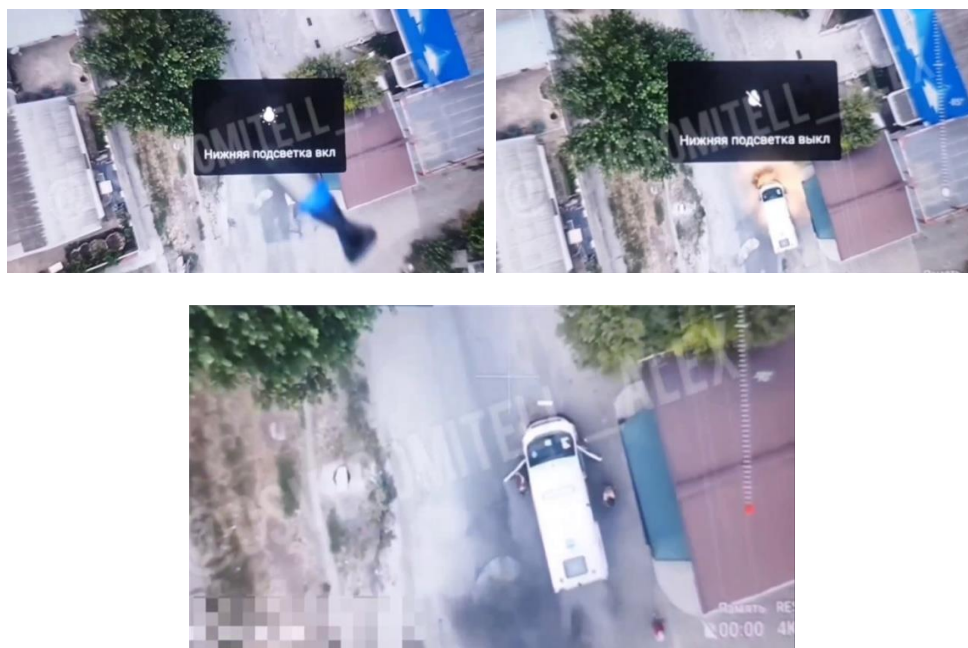
38. A 45-year-old man from Stanislav village recounted that in November 2024, a drone dropped an explosive near him as he was riding a moped, badly injuring his leg. An ambulance arrived, and while he was receiving first aid, a drone dropped two explosives on the ambulance.

39. Two staff members of Kherson’s Oncology Hospital reported that in November 2024, two ambulances parked on the grounds of the hospital were destroyed by drone attacks. The explosions caused a fire which burnt the ambulances. Around the day of the attack, Russian Telegram channels posted videos of the attack and one photograph of two visibly burnt ambulances, with the titles, “*Kherson. Red Zone. Oncology. [...]*” Photographs shared by staff of the hospital and Ukrainian authorities confirm the destruction of the same ambulances.

40. The Commission also examined videos dated August and October 2024, which show drones aiming at ambulances while they are driving on the road (see Telegram post, figure 5).

¹³ Geneva Convention IV, arts. 18-19.

Figure 5. Post on Russian Telegram channel, 28 August 2024



The sequence of screenshots from a video released in this post shows a drone attack targeting an ambulance that slows down and stops in a street of Kherson city, and passengers running out of the ambulance (see paras. 36-40).

VII. Consequences for the life of civilians in the affected areas

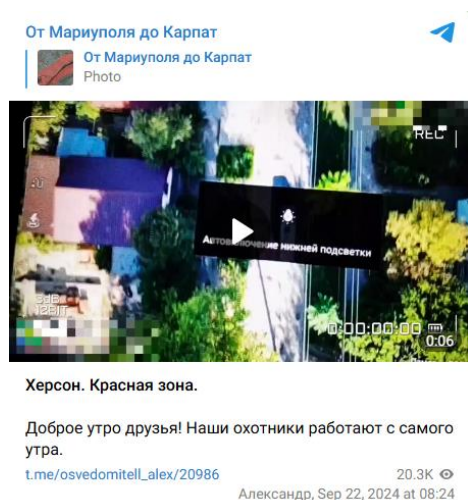
“If anyone thinks they will evade these hunters, welcome to the red zone.”

Post on a Russian Telegram channel, 26 August 2024

41. The population of Kherson city and other localities along the right bank of Dnipro River has been living for months in a climate of permanent fear due to the recurrent attacks. Interlocutors described severe psychological effects and a sense that any movement outside involves serious risks for personal safety. Several residents called the road running through Kherson city to Antonivka settlement “the road of death”. A woman stated that on her way to work, she regularly sees drones dropping explosives, “we walk and we risk it – it is awful!”. A man said that drones “target anywhere there is movement”. Residents stay indoors as much as possible, go out on cloudy days, or hide under the foliage of trees, to avoid being spotted by drones. A woman, however, said that even then, “drones are still attacking people no matter what”.

42. In addition to the explicit videos of attacks mentioned above, text disseminated by Russian Telegram channels issuing threats of attacks against any form of movement or transport across a large urban area have contributed to spreading terror among the population (see paras. 19, 27, and 31). Some of the posts refer to drone attacks as “hunting”, which is also how residents experience the attacks. On 19 August 2024, a video of a drone that chased a civilian car and injured the passenger was posted with the text, “The hunt is in full swing” (see also Telegram post, figure 6). A senior practitioner of a Kherson city hospital stated, “Russian Federation soldiers behave like this is a safari [...]; they are simply chasing and hunting civilians who are on their way to work or walking their dogs. They drop explosives from drones like it is a video game. [...]” One of the Telegram channels, in its general channel description, even states “We instil fear in the Kherson direction” (“Наводим страх на Херсонском направлении”).

Figure 6. Post on Russian Telegram channel, 22 September 2024



Screenshot of a Telegram post with a video of an attack on a bus and text stating, “Kherson. Red zone. Good morning, friends! Our hunters are working since early morning.” (see para. 42)

43. In addition, Russian armed forces have targeted many objects and sites with drones, resulting in killing or injuring civilians present there, as well as damage or destruction of civilian buildings, houses, and vehicles, as well as infrastructure, including for power generation and transmission, and gas installations. They targeted internet antennas, depriving people of means of communication and information. Drones also hit hospitals, including the grounds of Kherson’s Oncology Hospital, regardless of their protected status under international humanitarian law.

44. The recurrent attacks and risks thereof led to the closure or the limited functioning of shops and services that are essential for the daily life of the residents. In addition to ambulances, drones attacked fire trucks, emergency, and repair crews. According to residents, many areas were no longer supplied with electricity, gas, heating, or water. In some situations, residents undertook repairs themselves, bearing considerable risks. In other cases, repairs were impossible.

45. Public transport has no longer been able to operate in certain areas or was forced to reduce its services. Even taxis have stopped serving areas at risk of attacks. Parked cars have also been targeted. The systematic attacks on all forms of transport have led to an absence of any means of transport in the affected areas, prompting residents to go on foot, at times over long distances, exposing them to risks of attacks (see paras. 14 and 22-26).

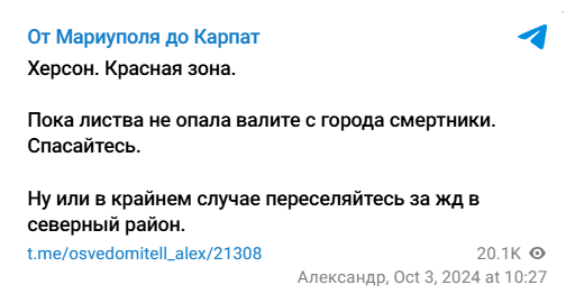
46. Local authorities and residents living along the right bank of Dnipro River also reported that drones had been dropping mines in various localities, as well as on the roads connecting them. This poses additional dangers to civilians. According to a local authority, a 71-year-old man stepped on a mine, due to which part of his leg had to be amputated. Another local authority recounted that in November 2024, while helping with the evacuation of two men injured by drone, she stepped on a mine and lost the lower part of her leg.

47. Russian Telegram channels regularly upload posts calling for the civilian population to leave the area altogether (see Telegram post, figure 7). Such text started to appear in August 2024 and has been shared with an increased frequency since October 2024. For instance, on 27 August 2024, a Telegram channel posted, “*Our advice. Get out of here. Or wait. We will definitely come.*” On 3 October 2024, another Telegram post stated, “[...] *Get out of the city before the leaves fall, you who are destined to die. Save yourselves.*” The following standard message has been reposted for months, “*Civilians to be alert and careful. Limit your movement and leave the area if possible.*”

48. The recurrent character of the attacks, the spread of terror among the population, the damage caused to civilian objects and infrastructure by drones, and the absence or limited functioning of services, have rendered most of the affected areas unlivable, forcing many to

flee. Some relocated to places deemed safer within Kherson Province, further away from the river front. Interlocutors described buildings that are almost empty. According to residents, those who did not leave are mainly older persons who had nowhere to go, or those who needed to care for their relatives.

Figure 7. Post on Russian Telegram channel, 22 September 2024



Screenshot of a Telegram post with text stating, “Kherson. Red zone. Get out of the city before the leaves fall, you who are destined to die. Save yourselves. Or, as a last resort, move to the northern district, beyond the railway.” (see para. 47)

VIII. Perpetrators and weapons used

49. The Commission is not aware of any steps taken by Russian authorities to halt months-long drone attacks against civilians in various localities of Kherson Province and the public dissemination of violent content. The Russian Telegram channels that have posted footage of attacks and threatening text have mentioned drone units of the 18th Combined Arms Army and the “Dnepr” Group of Forces of the Russian armed forces as responsible for many of the drone attacks. The Commission’s investigations have confirmed that these military entities have been operating in Kherson Province and have identified some of their commanders, as well as some drone units involved in the attacks.

50. Several Russian Telegram channels have contributed to spreading terror among the population by posting videos showing drones chasing civilians, the resulting harm to body and health, as well as threatening text. The Telegram channel that has been the most active in regularly disseminating material and has 50,000 subscribers has been officially registered with the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, as legally prescribed in the Russian Federation for channels with over 10,000 subscribers (see para. 17).¹⁴ Several other Telegram channels have disseminated similar material. Many posts shared on these channels point to links between them and units of the above-mentioned 18th Combined Arms Army and the “Dnepr” Group of Forces.

51. The same Telegram channels have uploaded posts showing the drones used by Russian army units in Kherson Province. Several types of drones have been used. The ones most frequently visible are drones manufactured by Da-Jiang Innovations (DJI), recognizable by their frame, remote controllers, and original packaging that can be regularly seen in Telegram posts spread over months. Many of the videos of drone attacks have head-up displays matching those of DJI models. DJI drones are civilian drones that are widely commercially available. Their use by both parties during the armed conflict in Ukraine has been widely reported,¹⁵ for reconnaissance and surveillance, or after modifications into weaponized drones that can drop explosives on targets.

¹⁴ See Russian Federation, Federal Law No. 303-FZ, On Amending to the Federal Law “On Communications” and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation, 8 August 2024.

¹⁵ See for example, Center for Security Studies, “Learning from the Ukrainian Battlefield: Tomorrow’s Drone Warfare, Today’s Innovation Challenge”, August 2024; Geneva Centre for Security Policy, “The War in Ukraine: Reality Check for Emerging Technologies and the Future of Warfare”, April 2024.

52. DJI is a Chinese-registered company. It has declared that its products are not designed for military applications.¹⁶ The company stated that on 26 April 2022, it had suspended all commercial activities in the Russian Federation and Ukraine, in light of the ongoing hostilities, and contractually forbade any sales by dealers to either country and for combat use.¹⁷ In addition, in 2023 and in 2024, the People's Republic of China implemented temporary export controls on specific drones.¹⁸

53. Concerning suicide drones, some of the same Telegram channels reported that drone operators have been using VT-40 drones produced by the Russian Federation (see para. 10).

IX. Conclusions and recommendations

54. Russian armed forces have carried out attacks that killed or injured civilians, using drones, in Kherson city and other localities of Kherson Province, in violation of the fundamental principle of international humanitarian law that attacks may only be directed at military objectives.¹⁹ The drone operators used video feeds transmitted in real time by the cameras embedded in the drones, focused on targets that were visibly civilian, and dropped explosives on them. The evidence collected leaves no doubt that the perpetrators intended to carry out those acts. The Commission has therefore concluded that Russian armed forces have perpetrated the war crimes of intentionally directing attacks against civilians in Kherson and other settlements of the right bank of Kherson Province.²⁰ It has also concluded that the publishing of videos of civilians being killed and injured amounts to the war crime of outrages upon personal dignity.²¹

55. The drone attacks committed by Russian armed forces have been widespread and systematic (see paras. 14-16). They have repeatedly targeted multiple civilian targets, for months, in several localities situated across a wide geographic area. The attacks followed a regular pattern and the same *modus operandi*, demonstrating that they were planned, directed and organized, and thus part of an organisational policy. Their recurrence since July 2024 indicates that Russian authorities have developed the necessary capacities, as well as mobilised and allocated resources in terms of personnel and materiel. Moreover, Russian Telegram channels have disseminated hundreds of videos displaying the crimes, as well as posts with text announcing more attacks. Considering that the footage is generated by the drones themselves, this and other factors mentioned above illustrate that the commission of attacks against civilians was encouraged and promoted. There is no information suggesting that the Russian military and civil authorities have taken any steps to prevent or stop the crimes during this long period. The combination of these elements leads the Commission to conclude that Russian authorities have committed murder of civilians in Kherson Province, as part of a coordinated state policy, and hence, as crimes against humanity.²²

¹⁶ Da-Jiang Innovations, Statement On Military Use Of Drones, 21 April 2022.

¹⁷ Da-Jiang Innovations, Statement On DJI's Relationship with Aeromotus, 13 April 2023.

¹⁸ Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, "Announcement No. 28 of 2023 by the Ministry of Commerce, the General Administration of Customs, the State Administration of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense, and the Equipment Development Department of the Central Military Commission on the Implementation of Temporary Export Control on Some UAVs", 31 July 2023;

Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, "Announcement No. 31 of 2024 by the Ministry of Commerce, General Administration of Customs and Equipment Development Department of the Central Military Commission on Optimizing and Adjusting Export Control Measures for UAVs", 31 July 2024.

¹⁹ Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, arts. 48 and 52(2).

²⁰ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, art. 8(2)(b)(i).

²¹ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, art. 8(2)(b)(xxi).

²² Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, art. 7(1)(a). See for example, ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Katanga*, Decision on the confirmation of charges, Case No. ICC-01/04-01/07-717, 14 October 2008, para. 396; ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Bemba*, Decision on the Charges, Case No. ICC-01/05-01/08-424, 15 June 2009, para. 81.

56. The civilian population in the areas affected by drone attacks lives in constant fear. No one feels safe as a consequence of the nature and broad range of targets of attacks, and the circumstances in which they occur, their frequency, intensity, and geographic spread. Residents take risks every time they go outside and have been in situations where they had to run and seek cover as drones were chasing them. Many wait for cloudy days to go out, or seek cover under trees, where possible. The fear is compounded as emergency services are often unable to reach in time due to drone attacks. Russian Telegram channels have disseminated posts announcing further attacks using the term “hunting”. They referred to a wide geographic area, which they call red zones, where any form of movement will be targeted.²³ The circumstances of the attacks, the videos, and the explicit threatening text demonstrate that Russian armed forces and those supporting them have committed acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population, in violation of international humanitarian law.²⁴

57. Finally, the conduct of the perpetrators had the effect of forcing large numbers of the population of different affected localities to leave.²⁵ The scale and intensity of the drone attacks against civilians and civilian objects, their widespread and systematic character, the prevailing climate of fear, and the ensuing coercive environment, have compelled thousands to flee. The destruction of houses and of basic infrastructure, the targeting of all means of transport, and attacks against emergency and rescue services, have rendered the affected areas unliveable and left many residents with no other choice than to seek safer locations. Moreover, Russian Telegram channels have repeatedly disseminated videos showing the attacks and posts explicitly exhorting the population to leave. These elements combined suggest a coordinated state policy, on the part of the Russian authorities, to force the population of Kherson city and the other targeted localities along the right bank of the Dnipro River, to leave the area. The Commission therefore concludes that Russian armed forces may have committed the crime against humanity of forcible transfer of population.²⁶

58. Based on the findings in the current paper, the Commission sets out its recommendations below.

59. The Commission recommends that the Russian Federation:

- (a) Immediately end the drone attacks against civilians;
- (b) Immediately end drone attacks on civilian objects, in particular those with special protection under international humanitarian law, such as hospitals and medical transports;
- (c) Immediately stop any acts that spread terror among the civilian population and that lead to forcible displacement;
- (d) Ensure that all perpetrators involved in the commission of such crimes, in particular commanders and other superiors and those ordering, soliciting or inducing their commission, are held accountable, in accordance with international standards;
- (e) Ensure that all those who broadcasted videos of attacks, photographs, and threatening text, and thereby committed or contributed to the commission of the above-mentioned crimes, are held accountable, in accordance with international standards.

60. The Commission recommends that Ukraine:

- (a) Ensure that the victims of drone attacks are included in the current support systems;

²³ See for example, ICTY, *The Prosecutor v. Milosevic*, Appeal Judgement, 12 November 2009, paras. 52-54.

²⁴ Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, art. 51(2).

²⁵ See for example ICC, *The Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda*, Judgment, Case No. ICC-01/04-02/06 , 8 July 2019, paras. 1056, 1060, 1061, and 1067.

²⁶ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, art. 7(1)(d).

(b) **Make available the best possible physical and mental healthcare services close to the most affected areas to ensure that those who still live there can receive adequate treatment;**

(c) **Provide comprehensive support to those who were displaced as a consequence of drone attacks.**

61. **The Commission recommends that other States and regional and international organizations:**

(a) **Contribute both financially and with technical advice to the government of Ukraine for the provision of comprehensive support for victims and their families, and for persons that have been victims of or were displaced following drone attacks, including health, housing and psycho-social support.**
