

Hotlines fielded questions about boat strikes

Attacks have killed over 200 since September

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USA TODAY

The U.S. military has killed more than 200 people in strikes on boats in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific in the last nine months in what legal experts and former military lawyers broadly agree constitute illegal military orders that service members should refuse to follow.

While there is no record of troops refusing to follow these orders, at least a handful of service members grappling with these questions have sought legal advice, according to anonymous hotlines for U.S. military members.

Before the Trump-era boat strikes, the United States viewed the drug trade as a law enforcement issue and tasked the Coast Guard with interdicting boats trying to bring drugs into the country.

Since then, the Trump administration has released no evidence that any of the suspected narco-trafficking boats carried drugs or that their occupants worked for drug cartels. It has never identified the people it killed – just a handful of names have been published in news reports. Family members also filed a federal lawsuit naming their relatives, whom they allege were murdered by the United States.

The military has published dozens of videos of the attacks on social media – grainy, black-and-white videos taken from above of boats speeding through the water before they explode into balls of flame.

And Trump officials continue to say the attacks are lawful. At a June 2 Senate budget hearing, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said every boat strike “has a legal officer on the deck that has to make a determination about whether the call is legal or not.”

The Pentagon referred USA TODAY’s questions to U.S. Southern Command, which oversees military operations in South America and the Caribbean. The command said in a statement, “All operations are conducted deliberately and lawfully, in full compliance with U.S. and international law, including the law



Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth, center, has compared drug cartels to terrorist groups like al-Qaida and said the boat strikes act as a deterrent to drug traffickers. MARIA ALEJANDRA CARDONA/REUTERS FILE

of armed conflict.”

“All targeting criteria are developed according to legal, operational, and intelligence requirements,” the statement said.

Since the first strike on Sept. 2, 2025, scores of legal experts and former military lawyers have characterized the strikes as extrajudicial killings or murders. Members of the military are required by U.S. law to refuse illegal orders.

Dan Maurer, a retired Army lieutenant colonel and former military lawyer, said he hoped the boat strikes would serve as an example for future generations.

“It’s going to be a shameful episode in the history of American military operations, and I hope it becomes a case study in what not to do,” he said.

Legal hotlines get calls

Two organizations that provide anonymous legal advice for military members grappling with orders they fear are illegal said they had received calls from service members concerned about the legality of the boat strikes, some from people directly involved in them.

Steve Woolford, a resource counselor

with Quaker House and the GI Rights Hotline, said he spoke with about four service members involved in the operation who were seeking legal and ethical guidance. One discussed helping plan a strike, and two others were ordered to execute strikes, he said.

“I think this is exactly what was described as a war crime,” Woolford said one caller told him.

Woolford said some of these callers were connected to lawyers, but he wasn’t aware of anyone who had refused an order or taken legal action. Callers are “more scared now that they’d be punished if they did bring something up,” he said.

If a service member refuses to follow an order, the case may be brought before a military judge to determine if the order was lawful. However, before that call is made, service members could be removed from duty immediately.

Ethical concerns heightened

The simmering concerns surrounding the boat strikes boiled over following news reports that the first-ever boat strike in September left two survivors that the military killed in a second, “double-tap” strike about 40 minutes later.

The Pentagon has refused to publicly release footage of that second strike. Lawmakers who viewed it in a classified setting called it deeply disturbing.

“What I saw in that room was one of the most troubling things I’ve seen in my time in public service,” U.S. Rep. Jim Himes of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said after viewing it.

“You have two individuals in clear distress – without any means of locomotion, with a destroyed vessel – who were killed by the United States,” he said.

International law prohibits killing adversaries who are wounded or have already surrendered. However, many experts say the strikes can’t be considered war crimes because the Trump administration’s case that it is at war with drug cartels does not stand up to scrutiny.

Maurer, the retired lieutenant colonel, said he found it “highly improbable” that a future administration would prosecute service members involved, both because of the broad popularity of the military and a lack of appetite in Washington to pursue what would resemble a “retribution campaign.”

“I don’t think criminal accountability is going to happen,” he said.

The mother and sister of Chad Joseph and Rishi Samaroo, two Trinidadian men whose families say were killed in an Oct. 14 boat strike, have sued the U.S. government for damages over the “wanton, willful, and outrageous killings,” according to a complaint filed in January. And relatives of Alejandro Carranza Medina, a Colombian man who was killed in a September strike, filed a formal complaint with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in December seeking compensation.

Steven Lepper, a retired Air Force major general who organized a working group of former military lawyers after Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth fired top lawyers across the military’s services, said he believes service members who participate in or observe illegal orders will eventually normalize them within the military.

“We are desensitizing the military to the notion that the orders they’re being given may be unlawful,” he said.

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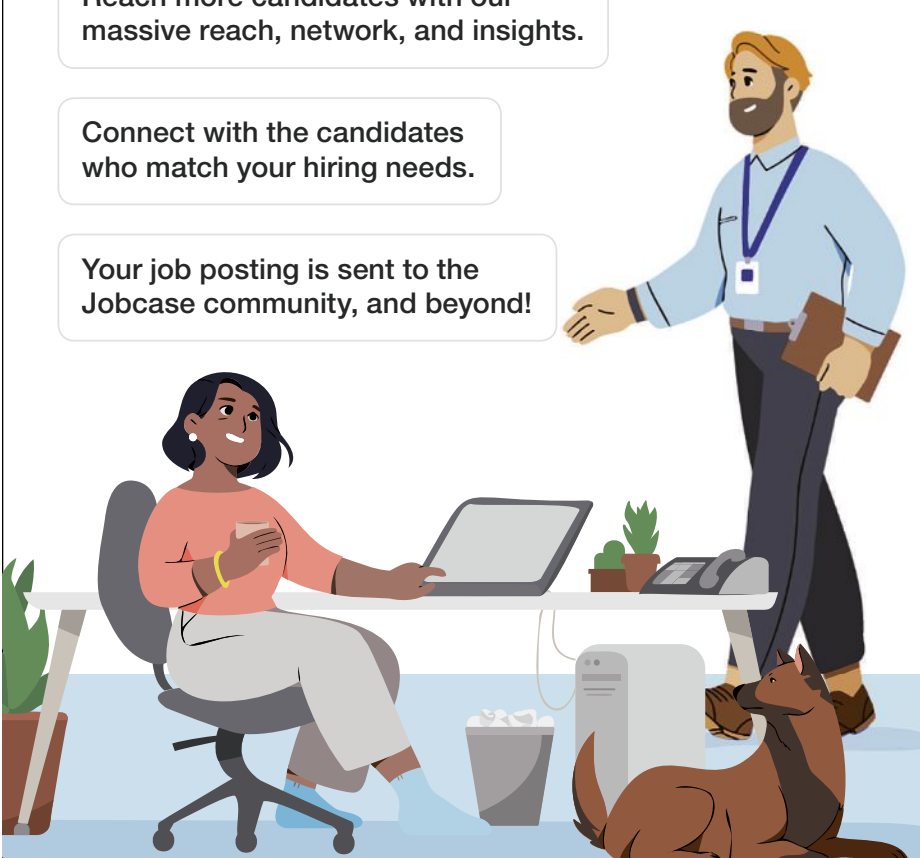
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