

France to arm military surveillance drones

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France is set to arm drones that are currently used exclusively for surveillance and intelligence, a first for the French military, the defense minister said Tuesday.

Florence Parly said the decision will initially apply only to the six unarmed Reaper surveillance drones that France bought from the United States. Most of them, based in Africa's Sahel region, are involved in the fight against Islamic extremists.

Parly did not specify a timeframe for when they would be armed or what kind of weapons would be deployed.

The drones wouldn't become "killer robots," Parly said, stressing that strikes would be governed by strict national and international rules relating to the use of force.

Arming the drones will give them "endurance, discretion, surveillance and strike capability at the right place and the right moment," she said in a speech in the southeastern city of Toulon,

The armed drones will help France's military become "more effective" and enable it to better use its fighter jets, helicopters and other aircrafts, she added.

Parly added that in the longer term, France is also jointly working with Germany, Italy and Spain to develop an armed European drone.

The issue has long been sensitive in France, where some critics have expressed fears about pilots operating at a great distance from the battle ground.

A report issued by French senators earlier this year concluded that drones are now "at the heart of all operational tools" in the fight against terrorism abroad.

The report said many countries are already using armed drones, including the United States, Israel, Great-Britain, Italy, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey.

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