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UK Surveillance Flights Over Gaza Raise Legal and Ethical Concerns Amid Media Silences

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The UK government has come under scrutiny for conducting hundreds of surveillance flights over Gaza in support of Israel, with minimal media coverage and growing concern over the nature and use of the intelligence gathered. Since December 2023, Royal Air Force aircraft have carried out extensive aerial surveillance missions, reportedly aimed at locating Israeli hostages held by Hamas. However, critics and human rights

organisations warn that the scale of the operations and the UK's lack of transparency could implicate Britain in potential violations of international law.

According to information released through parliamentary inquiries and investigative reporting, RAF aircraft, primarily Shadow R1 surveillance planes based in Cyprus, have flown over 500 missions across Gaza, collecting roughly 1,000 hours of aerial footage. Officially, the Ministry of Defence maintains that these operations are unarmed, non-combat, and solely intended to assist in the rescue of hostages. Despite this assertion, legal experts and civil society organisations argue that the extensive nature of the missions raises questions about whether the intelligence could also be supporting Israeli military targeting operations.

The missions continued even during periods of high civilian casualties, including on 1 April 2024, when an Israeli airstrike killed three British aid workers. The UK government has confirmed it possesses surveillance footage from that day but has refused to release it, citing security concerns. Families of the victims and legal advocacy groups have called for the footage to be shared, especially with international investigators, to determine whether UK intelligence was used in the targeting process.

The UK's refusal to confirm whether any intelligence has been shared with the International Criminal Court further fuels suspicion. Parliamentarians have pressed for clarity on the matter, yet the government has offered limited responses. Meanwhile, organisations such as the International Centre of Justice for Palestinians and Action on Armed Violence have called for full transparency and a public inquiry into the scope and implications of the UK's surveillance role.

Media coverage of the issue remains relatively sparse, with only limited reporting by mainstream outlets. Investigative journalists have criticised this lack of coverage, suggesting that the British media is failing to adequately report on a matter that could carry serious legal and moral consequences. As the humanitarian situation in Gaza worsens, pressure is mounting on the UK government to clarify the purpose of its surveillance operations and ensure that British military assets are not being used in ways that contravene international humanitarian law.