



## PRESS CONFERENCE TRANSCRIPT

### Release of UNAMA's 2015 Annual Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

*[near-verbatim; edited for clarity]*

**Kabul – Sunday, 14 February 2016**

Participants:

- **UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom**
- **Director of UNAMA Human Rights, Danielle Bell**

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**Nicholas Haysom:** Welcome to you all and thank you for attending this press conference convened by UNAMA. Let me say right at the outset that this report is jointly produced by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva and the UNAMA Human Rights Unit here in Kabul. I associate myself with this report and I can confirm that High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein has also endorsed the report.

As part of its mandate under Security Council Resolution 2210, UNAMA carries out independent and impartial monitoring of incidents involving loss of life or injury to civilians. It conducts advocacy and it engages directly with all the parties to the conflict to strengthen protection of civilians affected by the armed conflict.

The most important finding in the report is that 11,002 Afghans – civilians, non-combatants – have died or were injured in 2015. This figure surpasses by 4 per cent the same figure for 2014.

We have high-lighted this horrible phenomenon by referencing the year on year continuous increase in the level of civilian casualties. The truth is that the figures, in themselves, are awful. Over 11,000 Afghans died or were injured last year as a result of this conflict.

Because what we report is controversial, and because the figures are frequently contested by those to whom responsibility is attributed, I myself as the special Representative of the Secretary-General have had to satisfy myself that the methodology used is rigorous and that we can rely on the findings of the report.

I can reassure you that the information in the report is triple-checked. It is reliable, and the modalities used by the Human Rights Unit, which are fully described in the report, have been recognized as global best practice by the Oxford Research Group in its comparative evaluation of war monitoring across the whole world.

The report has been shared with all the parties to the conflict before its publication, including the ANA, the ANP, the NDS, the international military forces and the Taliban.

UNAMA engages in constructive face-to-face dialogue with all the parties to the conflict. Our objective is not simply to shame and blame but to effect real changes in the practices of the parties to the conflict. We share our report, not only to ensure its accuracy to capture all perspectives on the conflict, but because our primary objective is to change what happens on the battlefield.

We recognize that all the parties to the conflict have agreed on the need to avoid civilian casualties. But what we need to see are those same parties going beyond public statements, to change the way they conduct the war. What I want to do is, next year, when we release our report for 2016, to be able to report to you that there has been a significant drop in civilian casualties.

I have no doubt that a peace agreement would lead to a reduction in civilian casualties. But until we have a peace agreement, we must call on those parties engaged in the conflict, who have it within their power to reduce the number of civilian casualties, to commit to taking every step that will avoid harm and injury to civilians.

I would note that this report reflects similar findings and identical trends as presented by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

I will share with you that at every one of my briefings to the Security Council, I have raised the question of the unacceptable level of civilian casualties. Members of the Security Council have themselves condemned the civilian casualties in Afghanistan. But we must also look to the overarching international system of humanitarian law which envisages that the reckless and indiscriminate killing of civilians is a war crime and is punishable in international courts under that label.

Reading the statistics and percentages contained in the report doesn't really reflect the real horror of the phenomenon we are talking about. They don't capture the impact of the bombs, the IEDs, the indirect fire on civilian communities. The real cost we are talking about in these figures is measured in the maimed bodies of children, the communities who have to live with loss, the grief of colleagues and relatives, the families who have to make do without a breadwinner, the parents who grieve for lost children, the children who grieve for lost parents.

These are the real consequences of the acts described in this report. It is this violence and its impact on civilians that we need to acknowledge and in doing so call upon the parties to the conflict to take every step to avoid these consequences. And that is why this report specifically includes the voices of Afghans who have been directly impacted by violence and highlights the protection concerns of the most vulnerable, especially women and children.

Thank you.

**Danielle Bell:** Last year, UNAMA documented 3,545 civilian deaths, 7,457 injured (or 11,002 civilian casualties), a four per cent increase from 2014, and the highest level of total civilian casualties recorded in a single year by UNAMA.

The overall four per cent increase resulted mainly from a rise in suicide and complex attacks carried out in Kabul city, as well as the Taliban offensive in Kunduz last year. In most parts of Afghanistan in 2015 civilian casualties decreased.

Ground engagements killed and injured the most civilians, followed by IEDs, complex and suicide attacks.

These tactics, combined with targeted killings, accounted for 90 per cent of total civilian casualties.

Anti-Government Elements continued to cause the majority of harm, causing 62 per cent of civilian casualties - a 10 per cent decrease from last year.

Despite this overall decrease, the mission recorded increases in civilian casualties from targeted killings, complex and suicide attacks, and pressure-plate IEDs.

In addition, the reduction of civilian casualties caused by Anti-Government Elements must be considered in the light of an increase in unattributed casualties.

Anti-Government Elements – including the Taliban – continued to carry out and publicly claim attacks on persons and locations that are clearly civilian under international law, including killings of community leaders, judicial authorities, civilian Government officials and humanitarian workers.

The report encourages Taliban and other anti-government element groups to apply a definition of civilian that is consistent with international law.

Pro-Government Forces caused 1,854 civilian casualties – while this accounts for 17 per cent of the total, it also represents a 28 per cent increase compared to 2014.

Of this 17 per cent, Afghan national security forces caused 14 per cent, international military forces two per cent, and pro-Government militia groups one per cent.

The rise in civilian casualties attributed to Pro-Government Forces resulted mainly from increased fighting in civilian-populated areas and the use of indirect weapons, mainly mortars, coupled with increase in civilian casualties from aerial operations.

The report also notes significant progress made by the Government of Afghanistan in the development of a national level policy on civilian casualty prevention and mitigation, and encourages the finalization and implementation of this policy in the near future.

As the SRSG said, the report draws special attention to the human rights and protection issues concerning the most vulnerable, women and children.

Of the 11,002 civilian casualties, one in 10 was a woman and one in four was a child.

Women casualties increased by 37 per cent while child casualties increased by 14 per cent.

The report also highlights issues concerning women's freedom of movement, access to healthcare, access to education, and it notes a disturbing new trend of Anti-Government Elements increasingly using parallel justice structure mechanisms – including executions and lashings -- to punish women for moral crimes. And the mission plans to release a separate report on this in the near future.

The report also looks at other key protection issues, including school closures, incidents affecting access to healthcare, displacement, and harm from unexploded ordnance.

In conclusion, the report references commitments made by all parties to the conflict to protect civilians, however, the figures documented in 2015 reflect a disconnect between commitments made and the harsh reality on the ground.

With the expectation of continued fighting in the coming months combined with the current levels of harm, immediate steps to be taken by all parties to the conflict to protect Afghan communities from further harm.

The report is available on the website and it will be available in Dari and Pashto as a full report in the coming weeks.

Thank you very much.

**Qais Azimy, Al Jazeera:** I know you are hoping that, in 2016, the number will be decreased. But the reality on the ground, and also some military leaders have already said, that 2016 could be very bad. So what else could you do to make sure that we are not seeing an increase in the number? And also what is your personal view, what are your thoughts, and the reality of what you're seeing in the first two months? And also, sir, about the report, how general was this report? Were you able to go to the areas where the Taliban are in control to get numbers from there too or no?

**Haysom:** Let me say that even if 2016 were to see an intensification of the fighting, which we can't say for certain, but that is no excuse to see the civilian casualties rise. The civilian casualties is really about the damage done to non-combatants and in our report we make a number of recommendations to the parties. We engage with the parties and we talk to them about the steps that they can take to diminish the impact of the conflict on the innocent. And we will continue to do that. I still believe, even if the conflict were to intensify, it would be possible to reduce the damage on the innocent. In regard to the monitoring of what takes place in Taliban areas, I'll ask Danielle to reply.

**Bell:** You had asked if the report first was general and do we have access in Taliban areas. The report documents over 4,200 separate incidents of conflict-related violence, each of which resulted in civilian casualties. Within those incidents, they are broken down by region, province, district, tactic, perpetrator, victim, victim's age. Every victim in here has a name. Regarding access to Taliban areas, indeed it's a challenge. UNAMA relies on a very highly reliable network -- outreach network of community leaders, teachers, doctors. We visit hospitals, clinics. Every incident in here is verified by three different types of sources. Additionally, we do regular outreach to all communities including Taliban-controlled areas. And this often means bringing people into our offices or meeting them in neutral places, so we can speak to them directly. For example, with IDPs displaced from communities in Kot district Nangarhar, we met directly with IDPs in Jalalabad for example. So very specific, thank you very much.

**Qais Azimy, Al Jazeera:** Knowing that the majority of civilian casualties are caused by the Taliban, would you like to give them a message because the media is here? What would be your message?

**Haysom:** We would say that to reduce civilian casualties is an obligation under international law. It's an obligation which affects all parties. It's an obligation in terms of Islamic law. And we would urge them to consider the recommendations which we have made, which also addresses them, specifically, on the steps that they can take to reduce civilian casualties. Can I say that we will do that -- it's not if we were to meet them -- we will do that directly.

**Zabiullah Doorandesh, Khurshid TV:** Does the report, which you have released, include the casualties caused by Daesh. Daesh is present in some parts of the country, mainly the eastern part of Afghanistan. How serious a threat is it, given that the fighting will be intensified and the Taliban will be present together with Daesh? How do you assess this threat?

**Bell:** I will answer the first part of the question. In 2015, UNAMA recorded 83 separate incidents carried out by Daesh in Afghanistan, which also include threats, intimidation and harassment. Of the 83 incidents, 82 took place in Nangarhar mostly in Kot, Achin and Spinghar area in southern Nangarhar resulting in 39 deaths, 43 injured and 82 abducted. As you know, Daesh does not have natural foothold in Afghanistan, and what we observe particularly in southern Nangarhar is the capacity of ANSF to contain Daesh to that pocket of south Nangarhar.

**Haysom:** Let's take aside the question of the foreign fighters who are not strictly Daesh. Daesh's contribution to the overall civilian casualties, and to the conflict more broadly, is very limited at the moment. Of course it may be a much more important phenomenon but their actual engagement in the conflict is still more limited when looked at against the full picture.

**Abdullah Nezami, BBC Pashto:** You mentioned that, following the Taliban, the national security forces of Afghanistan were responsible for the biggest part of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. And also you mentioned the international law on the basis of which those who commit civilian casualties will be tried in the international court and will be considered war criminals. I would like to know whether Dr. Abdullah and Dr. Ghani will be included in those people who could be called war criminals? And secondly, what is the role of the UN regarding the peace talks in Qatar and other parts of the world on the peace process in Afghanistan?

**Bell:** On the first part of the question you asked about attribution of responsibility for civilian casualties. The vast majority remains Anti-Government Elements including the Taliban at 62 per cent. At 17 per cent is Afghan security forces, followed by unattributed fighting between two of them. But the vast majority is Anti-Government Elements.

**Haysom:** In regard to the question of accountability for causing civilian casualties, we would want to believe and we continue to call for accountability for the actions of those who are directly responsible for civilian casualties. I know of no international court that's directly seized with the Afghan conflict, but I would want to believe that there will eventually be accountability; that these, as it were, crimes committed -- if they have been committed -- should not be simply ignored. I think there are many who believe it's a worldwide responsibility, not only here, but also in places like Syria and elsewhere that there needs to be accountability for what people do on the battlefield.

**Hamid Mayar, Shamshad TV:** I would like to know your latest information about the fighting in Baghlan. What is going on in Baghlan? According to reports, civilian houses have been

attacked, and hundreds of hundreds of civilians have been killed in this regard as a result of this fighting. Which province has seen the highest number of casualties in 2015?

**Bell:** We are closely monitoring the situation in Baghlan. In the past couple of weeks, we are currently following up on 20 separate incidents in Baghlan, mainly in Pul-i-Khumri, Doshi and Baghlani Jadid. We have confirmed so far 27 civilian casualties, 7 deaths and 20 injured, including two women and 13 children. Regarding destruction of houses and destruction of a mosque, we are currently trying to verify -- and indeed we have received these allegations -- we are currently following up with Afghan security forces, Taliban as well as people on the ground.

**Haysom:** If I could just answer the unfinished part of the question on what UN's attitude is to peace and what it is doing. Let me just share with you that from my travels in this country, I have detected an enormous thirst for peace. People, Afghans want peace. I am also aware that they deserve peace after so many years in conflict. And finally, we clearly recognize that Afghans need peace. Without peace, there is very little prospect of dealing not only with civilian casualties but an improvement in the quality of life and in the economy and economic opportunities of the nation.

And that's why we engage with all the parties firstly on the need for peace and to commence the urgency of commencing a serious and engaged peace talk. I have spoken directly to the Taliban themselves and argued with them that what is required now is not more track II exercises and conference but direct face-to-face engagement with the government with the purpose of reaching an agreement and in particular ceasefire so that the people of Afghanistan can experience at least a measurable improvement in their lives from the increased security.

And we have offered the United Nations role in any capacity that will help whether as a facilitator, mediator, convener -- even in training people in how to engage in peace talks and we will continue to do that.

**Hamed Hakimi, Salaam Watandar Radio:** In your report, you attributed 60 per cent of the overall civilian casualties to the Anti-Government Forces and 17 per cent to the Pro-Government Forces, while 21 per cent is unattributed. What happened to that 21 per cent which is not attributed to any party? Also you stressed that the reason you are making this report is in order to prevent and also decrease the civilian casualties. While since 2009 UNAMA has released such reports, every year the number of civilian casualties has been on the rise.

**Bell:** Thank you. As you said 62 per cent to Anti-Government Elements, 17 per cent to Pro-Government Forces, 17 per cent unattributed to either party and 4 per cent unexploded ordinance. The extra 17 per cent of 'unattributed' results from a few different factors. Number one, you saw that there was a rise in civilian casualties from ground engagement. As the fight increasingly moves into civilian populated areas it is increasingly difficult or quite difficult to establish which party may or may not be responsible for a particular tactic. So it goes into Pro-Government Forces and Anti-Government Elements. For example, in Kunduz, my team documented close to a thousand civilian casualties, most of those we could not attribute to a specific party, also because we did not have staff on the ground at the time. So the fog of war -- those ones have almost doubled as the nature of the fight has shifted.

The second part of your question, you said civilian casualties have risen since 2009 when we began documenting and indeed you are correct. This year the figures have almost doubled what we recorded in 2009. But we have seen changes and improvements in practices on the battlefield. For example, in 2015, UNAMA recorded decreases in every region except north-east

and central and that was mainly Kabul city suicide attacks and fighting in Kunduz city last year. Elsewhere we documented decreases.

The third part of your question was where did we record the most civilian casualties? By region, south, north-east, east, south-east. By province, Kunduz, Kabul, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Helmand, Ghazni, Faryab, in that order. And all of the numbers are in the report, thank you.

**Haysom:** Let me also join my voice to Danielle's in saying that I believe these increases are despite our report, not because of our report. What we have noted in the commentary that we have made in the report, is that we have managed to secure very important political commitments to avoid civilian casualties, including from the Taliban: Public commitments. The question that we raise is that those public commitments must not be propaganda; they must be converted into effective instructions to those who are responsible for the conflict.

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