



**Press conference: Release of UNAMA's Mid-Year  
Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict report**

*[near verbatim]*

**Kabul, 25 July 2016**

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**Participants:**

- UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Tadamichi Yamamoto
- Director of UNAMA Human Rights, Danielle Bell

**Liam McDowall, Moderator / UNAMA Director of Strategic Communications:** Before introducing our distinguished speakers I have one short announcement. I would like you to please join me in remembering the casualties from Saturday's attack in Kabul, as well as in memory of all the civilians killed in the conflict in Afghanistan.

[Minute silence]

I now have the pleasure to introduce Tadamichi Yamamoto, who is the United Nations Secretary-General for Afghanistan, as well as being the head of UNAMA. He is joined by Danielle Bell who is UNAMA's Director of Human Rights.

**Tadamichi Yamamoto:** Welcome and thank you for attending this press conference convened by UNAMA.

The 2016 Midyear Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict is produced by UNAMA with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. The High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein and I have both endorsed the report and the findings contained in it. The terrible toll the conflict is taking on Afghan civilians was underscored again with the bombing of a peaceful protest in Kabul two days ago. At least 73 civilians were killed and 293 injured in a horrific – and indefensible – act of violence.

The findings in this report cover the first six months of the year. The Director of UNAMA's Human Rights Unit will get into greater detail, but overall it shows similar rates of casualties to 2015.

These findings are based on a rigorous methodology that has been recognized as best practice throughout the world in the field of casualty recording. Both myself, as Special Representative of the Secretary-General, and the High Commissioner for Human Rights are satisfied that the findings adhere to that methodology and can be relied upon.

We also note that the findings and trends are consistent with the monitoring carried out by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

UNAMA engages in on-going dialogue with all parties to the conflict and the report has been shared in advance. This includes the Government of Afghanistan, the international military forces and the Taliban.

We share our report, to ensure its accuracy and to include different perspectives. But above all, our primary objective is to promote change.

As you will see in the report, in the first half of the year UNAMA documented a level of civilian casualties comparable to the record-high recorded in 2015.

It shows, broken down by tactic, how parties to the conflict are causing civilian casualties. Areas of progress that parties to the conflict have undertaken to protect civilians are also noted.

Much more, however, remains to be done. All fighters must abide by international humanitarian and human rights law to reduce the impact of the conflict on the civilian population.

Ultimately, the burden is on the fighting parties to change practices and save lives. This report should be viewed by them as an essential tool to make that goal a reality.

All the parties to the conflict have already publicly stated the need to avoid civilian casualties. However, parties need to get beyond rhetoric to real changes on the ground.

We note that the Government of Afghanistan has been drafting a national policy on the protection of civilians. This is an important step and must be backed by sustained commitment of the Government and security forces.

We also note that Taliban have taken some steps to report on civilian casualties, including those killed and injured by their own activities. The United Nations encourages Taliban to make its policies public and to ensure they comply with international humanitarian law in all respects.

Even in the absence of a peace, all parties have it within their power to reduce the number of civilian casualties.

International humanitarian law and international human rights law are meant to prevent the reckless and indiscriminate killing of civilians. I remind parties to the conflict that accountability for crimes, violations, and abuses may take time, but perpetrators will be held to account.

This is not about cold statistics. Every number is a person with a history and a family. Every number represents the impact of a mortar on homes, an improvised explosive device shattering a bus journey, a suicide bomb in a market place or a civilian otherwise caught in the conflict.

Every number is multiplied when one considers the grief of communities, the families that have to make do without a breadwinner, the parents who mourn lost children.

These are the real and long-term consequences of the acts described in this report. The report includes the voices of Afghans who have been directly impacted by violence. It also highlights protection concerns of the most vulnerable, in particular women and children. What is reflected is the daily horror and uncertainty faced by the citizens of Afghanistan.

I now request Danielle Bell, UNAMA's Human Rights Director, to brief you on the key findings of the report.

**Danielle Bell:** Thank you very much, SRSG, and good morning ladies and gentlemen.

In the first six months of 2016, UNAMA documented 5,166 civilian casualties, or 1,601 civilian deaths and 3,565 injured, representing a four per cent increase in overall casualties compared to the same period in 2015. These figures, once again, represents the highest number of civilian casualties recorded by UNAMA in its Midyear report.

The four per cent increase in civilian casualties resulted mainly from ground fighting involving all parties to the conflict, and an increase in civilian casualties caused by complex and suicide attacks carried out by Anti-Government Elements.

Ground engagements between parties to the conflict caused almost 2,000 civilian casualties, a 23 per cent increase from last year.

Ground fighting continued to cause the highest number of civilian casualties, followed by suicide and complex attacks and then IEDs.

Anti-Government Elements continued to cause the majority of harm to civilians, causing 3,082 deaths and injuries, or 60 per cent of civilian casualties. This represents an 11 per cent decrease from last year. The decrease resulted mainly from fewer civilian casualties from targeted killings and IEDs.

Anti-Government Elements, including the Taliban, nonetheless continued to carry out attacks against persons and locations that are clearly civilian under international humanitarian law. This

included the deliberate killings of community leaders, civilian Government officials, media workers and judicial authorities.

Furthermore, despite this decrease, the mission recorded increases in civilian casualties from complex and suicide attacks, a trend that continues as evidenced by the tragic attack in Kabul two days ago.

In addition, the reduction in casualties attributed to Anti-Government Elements must be considered in light of an increase in casualties jointly attributed to both Pro-Government and Anti-Government forces, primarily during ground fighting.

I now turn to Pro-Government Forces. While Anti-Government Elements continued to cause the majority of civilian casualties, the report documents a 47 per cent increase in civilian casualties resulting from Pro-Government Forces, causing 1,180 civilian casualties, or 23 per cent of total civilian casualties.

Consistent with last year's trends, the rise in civilian casualties attributed to Pro-Government Forces resulted mainly from the use of indirect weapons in civilian areas, coupled with increased civilian casualties from aerial operations carried out by Afghan security forces.

As mentioned, the report also welcomes the development of a national policy to mitigate civilian harm, and urges the Government to finalize and implement the policy and accompanying action plan as a matter of urgency.

The report highlights protection concerns of the most vulnerable, in particular women and children.

Although women casualties decreased by 11 per cent, one in ten civilian casualties was a woman.

Child casualties increased by 18 per cent. Almost one out of every three casualties from this conflict is a child.

So far in 2016, children were killed and injured primarily from ground fighting and then explosive remnants of war.

In addition to loss of life and injury, the report documents continued human rights abuses by conflict actors. For example, the rights of women. The report documents six instances of Anti-Government Elements imposing parallel justice mechanism punishments, including executions and lashings, to punish women for so-called moral crimes.

In 2016, women and girls also continued to suffer restrictions on access to education and healthcare, as well as limitations on freedom of movement.

A worrying trend that impacts all of us in the room today, the report highlights trends on the right to freedom of expression, including continued threats to the media and it also documents the horrific attack on the Tolo TV shuttle bus on 20 January.

Concerns about the right to life are also noted throughout the report, including the deliberate targeting of civilians by conflict actors, and a lack of accountability for human rights violations and abuses.

In addition to the devastating toll in deaths and injuries, the report includes the voices of Afghans to demonstrate the appalling human cost of the conflict in Afghanistan. Parents who have lost their children, children who have lost their limbs, homes destroyed and lost livelihoods.

There has been immense suffering in the first six months of the year.

In conclusion, although this report takes note of some measures being taken to mitigate harm, more must be done to enable real improvements in civilian protection and greater respect for the human rights of all Afghans.

Thank you very much.

**Question:** Thank you. From Kabul News, I'd like to know UNAMA's view on the danger that Daesh poses to the Afghan people, especially after this group claimed responsibility for the recent attacks against the peaceful demonstrators. You also mentioned in your report and you attributed some percentage of the overall civilian casualties to the international security forces. Can you tell us exactly what are the numbers attributed to the international military forces?

**Tadamichi Yamamoto:** Thank you very much for the question. I will take the question on Daesh and ask Danielle to respond to the number of casualties caused by the international forces. Now on Daesh, regarding the incident two days ago, as you know they claimed responsibility. The investigation is still under way and we should wait until the investigation comes out with a finding. But generally speaking, we are very much concerned about the possibility of Daesh causing harm to the people of Afghanistan and to this country and to this region.

We have been watching, monitoring the activities of Daesh carefully in cooperation with the Afghan Government and also with the international community, including Resolute Support. We of course know, and I'm sure that you also know, that Daesh has tried to have a presence in many provinces in Afghanistan for some time. But the philosophy or the values of Daesh seem not to be accepted by the Afghan people. The Afghan people do not welcome them and with the cooperative work of the government, the international forces and -- we also know that they fought with the Taliban -- they have a very limited presence in Afghanistan as far as we know in the eastern provinces.

But even then, they have a foothold and we have been watching this extremely carefully, and any move to do with Daesh we have always paid serious attention to. There is a potential, but so far, the Afghan people have proven that they will not accept Daesh as a force to be welcomed in this country. In fact, the Afghan people have resisted their presence.

We would certainly hope that together with the cooperation of the international community and the Afghan Government that this strength will continue. UNAMA will naturally monitor, with

vigilance, the strength of Daesh, but with regard to the incident two days ago, I think we should really wait for the outcome of the official investigation. Thank you.

**Danielle Bell:** As the SRSG said, I could point you to the mid-year report. There's a section on civilian harm resulting from Daesh activities in the report. In the first six months of the year, UNAMA documented 122 civilian casualties attributed to ISIL/Daesh and this includes the June 10 remote-controlled IED in the Hesarak Mosque in Nangarhar. As the SRSG said, Daesh does not enjoy a foothold in or any support from Afghans. ANSF, or Afghan Security Forces, have well-demonstrated a capacity to contain their influence.

Regarding international military, in the first six months of the year, international military forces were responsible for approximately one per cent of civilian casualties, mainly from airstrikes, and the numbers are detailed in the report. Thank you.

**Question:** Thank you, this is Kawoon from the BBC. As you stated, the civilian casualties in Afghanistan had increased during past years. I'm wanting to know that despite your reports and your suggestions to all parties, do you think the peace efforts by Afghan Government has almost failed and it didn't help a decrease of civilian casualties, do you think it's time to take steps by different parties in Afghanistan? If you have any further suggestions, I want to hear. And also you said that you have shared the report with all parties. Did you share the report with Daesh in Afghanistan? Thank you.

**Tadamichi Yamamoto:** Thanks for the question. The peace efforts are very important, as you point out. It has been the principle policy of the Afghan Government to try to realize peace through negotiation and we have supported it and the international community has supported it. Now, what we have to understand is that the peace process is a very complex process, and it will take time for the peace process to take root. There have been many attempts. We have seen some progress.

It has not come to the real fruition of having a dialogue between the two parties yet. But, for instance, the recent efforts of the four parties in the quadrilateral group, and the involvement of Pakistan in this process. We know that the involvement of Pakistan in the process is extremely important. And you have seen from the statement of Pakistan that it is now very much trying to work with the Afghan Government in the peace process and we welcome this. But of course, more efforts have to be made. We believe that the peace process is something that will take some more time and we should not be reacting to the ups and downs immediately -- the ups and downs of each and every step, but the trend and the desire of the countries in this region and the people is clear, that they want peace through negotiations.

We would, as UNAMA, also like to help in this process of making sure that this peace process will begin by reflecting the desire of the people and the people of the region. So, the fact that the peace process is not immediately moving should not discourage you. The important thing is that people desire peace and that includes the countries in the region, and that efforts are made by all these countries and people to realize this peace.

There has to be a lot of consultations, negotiations, which have to take place before it really moves ahead. But I feel that there is potential for this peace process to go through and we know, for a fact, that the Government is making a lot of effort. We know for a fact that the Government is talking to countries in the region for assistance and cooperation. And we know for a fact that these countries are also interested to see progress in the peace process. So let us see where we go.

UNAMA will play its part, as necessary, to help the process. We all know that it's not easy, but we also know that negotiated peace is the only solution to bringing lasting peace to this country and we have to all make efforts. I firmly believe that there is a good potential for this to take place.

**Danielle Bell:** Also you had asked about why we keep doing this report if the numbers are going up. The role of the United Nations is to provide a normative framework for human rights and civilian protection. We do the monitoring, the documentation of the impact of the conflict on civilians. We continue to engage with all parties to the conflict on areas to reduce harm. So essentially we use this report as a tool to facilitate dialogue that will enable change.

The parties to the conflict may not always agree with our findings, but we have seen some progress on certain fronts. For example, policy commitments, movement towards greater accountability and, to some extent, changes on the ground.

Ultimately, however, the responsibility to protect civilians and to reduce the number of deaths and injuries falls upon the parties to the conflict who are bound by international humanitarian law.

**Question:** Have you shared your report with Daesh group?

**Danielle Bell:** Thank you for the question. The report has been shared in advance with the Government of Afghanistan and all of its security bodies, international military forces and the Taliban.

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