



PRESS CONFERENCE TRANSCRIPT

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

[near-verbatim; edited for clarity]

Kabul – Wednesday, 5 August 2015

Participants:

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

Danielle Bell: Good morning. The UNAMA Protection of Civilians report covers the first six months of 2015 and details how the conflict affected thousands of Afghans. The report documents incidents of civilian casualties broken down by categories including killed, injured, age, gender, perpetrator, incident type and location.

Most importantly, the report includes the voices of Afghans who have been directly impacted by the violence. Civilian deaths and injuries remained at the record high levels recorded during the same period last year. In the first six months of 2015, UNAMA documented 4,921 civilian casualties (consisting of 1,592 deaths and 3,329 injured), overall amounting to a 1 per cent increase in civilian casualties compared to last year.

Conflict related violence took a particularly heavy toll on women and children. While the overall increase in civilian casualties reached 1 per cent, women casualties increased by 23 per cent and children casualties increased by 13 per cent. The vast majority – or 90 per cent – of all civilian casualties resulted from ground engagements, improvised explosive devices (or IEDs), complex and suicide attacks and targeted killings.

Regarding attribution of responsibility, UNAMA documented a slight reduction – or three per cent – in civilian casualties caused by Anti-Government Elements, although they continued to cause the majority of harm. UNAMA attributed 70 per cent of all civilian casualties to Anti-Government Elements. Pro-Government Forces caused 16 per cent of civilian casualties – that is, 15 per cent to Afghan National Security Forces and 1 per cent to International Military Forces. Unattributed crossfire between parties to the conflict caused 10 per cent while unattributed explosive remnants of war caused the remaining four per cent.

Ground engagements remained the leading cause of civilian casualties, causing 1,577 casualties, although this figure reflects a 19 per cent decrease from the same period last year. The report details the human cost of continued fighting in civilian-populated areas, in particular, deaths and injuries from the use of indirect weapons, mainly mortars, in residential areas.

UNAMA documented a 21 per cent decrease in civilian casualties from IEDs, mainly due to fewer casualties from remote-controlled IEDs, although IEDs remained the second leading cause of all civilian casualties. Despite the overall decrease in civilian casualties from IEDs, UNAMA documented a 38 per cent increase in civilian casualties from pressure-plate IEDs, which caused 506 civilian casualties.

While UNAMA documented decreases in civilian casualties from ground engagements and IEDs, the 1 per cent overall increase in civilian casualties resulted from the rise in civilian deaths and injuries from suicide and complex attacks and targeted killings – the third and fourth leading causes of civilian casualties respectively.

Suicide and complex attacks carried out by Anti-Government Elements caused 1,022 civilian deaths and injuries, a 78 per cent increase compared with the first six months of last year. Civilian casualties from targeted killings increased by 57 per cent, causing 699 civilian casualties. The report highlights concern that Anti-Government Elements continued to target and kill civilians, including judicial authorities, mullahs, community leaders, civilian Government officials and humanitarian workers.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for 107 attacks deliberately targeting civilians or civilian locations. The report urges Anti-Government Elements to cease all attacks against civilians and calls for the Taliban to revise their definition of civilians in accordance with international humanitarian law.

International humanitarian law defines civilians as those persons who are not members of the armed forces, or fighters of a party to the conflict. International law also stipulates that civilians may never be the object of attack.

The report documents a 60 per cent increase in civilian casualties caused by Pro-Government Forces, mostly resulting from ground engagements, particularly during operations using indirect weapons systems, mainly mortars.

One of the key recommendations of the report is the implementation of a national policy on civilian casualty mitigation, backed by a concrete action plan to prevent civilian harm during the conduct of hostilities.

The report also raises concern about human rights abuses carried out by Pro-Government armed groups with impunity, and notes the continued involvement of these groups in operations carried out by Afghan national security forces.

In summary, the report documents the devastating consequences of the conflict upon Afghan men, women and children. This destruction and damage to Afghan lives must be met by a new commitment, by all parties to the conflict, to protect civilians from harm.

Thank you.

Nicholas Haysom: Welcome and thank you for attending this press conference convened by UNAMA. Let me say 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. I associate myself with this report and I can confirm that High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein has also endorsed the report.

The most important finding in the report is that 4,921 Afghans – civilians, non-combatants – have died or were injured in the first six months of 2015. This figure surpasses by a very small amount the same figure for the first six months of 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 horrible. Over 4,921 Afghans died or were injured in the first six months of this year.

Because the subject matter of this report is controversial, and because the figures are frequently contested, I myself as the SRSG of UNAMA 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 you find in this report has been double-checked and in some cases triple-checked. It is reliable, and the modalities used by our Human Rights Unit, which you will find described in the report, have been recognized as best global practice by the Oxford Research Group in its comparative evaluation of war monitoring worldwide.

This report has been shared with all the parties to the conflict in advance of its publication, including the ANA, the ANP, NDS, the international military forces and the Taliban.

UNAMA also engages in a 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 the practices in the field.

We recognize that all the parties to the conflict have agreed on the need to avoid civilian casualties. What we now need to see are those same parties going beyond public statements, public affirmations, and to effect changes in their practice. What I would want to be able to do in January next year, when we produce our end of the year report, is to reflect a significant drop in civilian casualties.

I have no doubt that a peace agreement and an end to the conflict would lead to the reduction in civilian casualties. But in the absence of such a peace agreement, we must now call on those parties engaged in the conflict, who have it within their power to reduce the number of civilian casualties, to effect changes, to try to commit to taking every step that will avoid civilian casualties.

Although our report reflects the approach and standards of the international community, we would note that this report echoes the findings, the recent findings, of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and we would want to align ourselves with the recommendations that they have made as well.

The cold statistics of the civilian casualties report and the percentages that we reflect in the report don't capture the horror of what we are really engaging with. They don't properly reflect

the impact of the bombs, the IEDs, and the indirect fire on civilian communities. The real cost that we are reflecting in our figures is measured in the maimed bodies of children, the loss of parents, the communities who have to fill in the gaps, the families that have to make do without a breadwinner, the parents who grieve for lost children and the children who grieve for lost parents.

These are the real consequences of these acts that are described in this report. It is this violence and the victims of this violence that we need to acknowledge and in doing so call upon the parties to the conflict to take every step to avoid these consequences.

Thank you.

Aziz Karimi, Ariana TV: *[translated from Dari]* As you also highlighted, every year people of Afghanistan witness an increase in the number of civilian casualties and you always request the parties to the conflict to prevent civilian casualties; I'd like to know whether the UN Security Council has discussed this issue and solution to it.

Haysom: I can report personally that at every briefing I have given to the Security Council the question of civilian casualties has been raised directly and the members of the Security Council have themselves commented and condemned it. But I think for the proper treatment of civilian casualties we must look to the overarching system of international humanitarian law and international human rights law which really envisages that the reckless and indiscriminate killing of civilians is a war crime and is punishable in the international courts under that label.

Shakila Ibrahimkhel, TOLO TV: *[translated from Dari]* You've mentioned that you are in contact and you share the reports with all the parties to the conflict. I would like to know whether you have discussed the issue of civilian casualties with the Taliban. And last year also you mentioned that you are engaging with the Taliban. If you are engaging with the Taliban, how many times and what issues did you discuss? And the other part of the question is that the demand and the wish of the Afghan people, as a precondition for the peace talks, is to have a ceasefire, whether you have discussed this with the Taliban or not?

Bell: As the SRSG mentioned, the report is shared with all the parties to the conflict, including the Taliban. The UNAMA Human Rights Unit engagement with the Taliban includes a number of different platforms. One is a sharing of civilian casualties incidents, which are sent to the UN, which we verify, as well as a verification of all the incidents and attacks that they publicly claim, which I mentioned in the report.

In terms of face to face dialogue and other forms of dialogue – written communication – the issue of civilian casualties, in particular those caused and claimed by the Taliban, is one of the most important elements of the human rights discussions and it is raised constantly. In addition, there have been a number of statements made recently by the Taliban that articulate a commitment to the protection of civilians. UNAMA is monitoring actively the implementation of these commitments, and if the commitments they are making verbally are having an effect on the ground level.

Haysom: These engagements with the Taliban on civilian casualties are robust. We don't hide our criticisms; we don't make pronouncements in our report which we then hide under the carpet when we deal with the Taliban. And they also engage with us robustly and we engage in some cases around certain incidents, around the practices and also about the definition of who is a civilian. And that is an ongoing commitment.

We are experienced at it, because we have had exactly the same discussion with the international military forces when they have been here and we have had those discussions with the Afghan forces. We treat all parties equally, and we see the obligations under international law as applying across the board.

In regard to a ceasefire or peace negotiations, we first of all recognize that it's not for the UN to negotiate a ceasefire with the Taliban. Our message to them has been to encourage them to engage directly with the Afghan Government in a process which would lead to a peace. We've made it clear that we support and believe that peace is a necessity for Afghanistan and we will continue to do so.

Mohammad Farhang, Rah-e-Farda TV: *[translated from Dari]* It is also mentioned in the report that 107 deliberate attacks occurred by the Taliban and 70 per cent of civilian casualties were attributed to the Taliban. The issue is here that the leader of the Taliban passed away two years ago. How relevant is it?

Haysom: I'm not sure that in international humanitarian law terms, or international human rights law terms, it really makes a difference. The command structure of any combatant force remains responsible for the acts committed by their armed forces in the field. And so there's a broader liability than just one focusing on Mullah Omar.

But let me just comment generally. We have noted the allegations and the consequences of the revelation of the death of Mullah Omar. To us, it's not clear at this stage what the precise consequences would be, but we would certainly hope that whatever they may be, they would at least open the door to a proper peace process in due course, even if, in the short term, there's unlikely to be movement on a peace process.

Mujeeb Ehsas, Kabul News: *[translated from Pashto]* In the report about 70 per cent of the civilian casualties are attributed to the Taliban, but both Taliban and the Pro-Government Forces are responsible for inflicting death and injury to civilians. How, precisely, you can say that 70 per cent has been attributed to the Taliban?

Bell: The UNAMA report includes almost 2,000 separate incidents of conflict-related violence. Every one of those incidents has been verified, not only by three sources, but at least three different types of sources. Some of the events have as many as 80 different interviews conducted. When UNAMA is unable to attribute responsibility to a specific party, as we do with 10 per cent of the casualties, we attribute it to both Anti-Government Elements and Pro-Government Forces. We are very confident of the 70 per cent attribution of civilian casualties to Anti-Government Elements. And that is in line with the press release of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, which yesterday revealed the same findings. Thank you.

Afghanistan Times: *[translated from Dari]* My question is why doesn't UNAMA use a more serious way of pressuring these armed groups, and also to focus on the root causes of these terrorist groups through the UN Security Council in order to stop civilian casualties and to stop the flight.

Bell: UNAMA engages with every party to the conflict, including the Taliban and Afghan National Security Forces. That goes far beyond a public report; it goes far beyond the numbers, as the SRSG said. The advocacy that we've carried out with all parties to the conflict has had a direct result on the way, in some of the tactics, and the way the fight is carried out. For example,

in the past, the advocacy we did behind the scenes with international military forces had a direct result in the way that they used their targeting protocols. The advocacy that we've done publicly on different tactics, such as pressure-plate IEDs and remote controlled devices, we've seen shifts in the way that the devices have been used and the incidents types in response to the advocacy that we've used with the findings of our report.

Haysom: On this question of civilian casualties, we would want to believe that we engage at every level. So we engage also with the military. It's very important, because they're the ones who make the decisions about operational tactics, which actually cause damage to civilians. And at least one of our concerns in our engagement with the Taliban is that we are not sure that the messages and the discussions we have with a more political side of the Taliban filter through to the cadres in the field. But it's also important to engage with the leadership and secure a commitment to the broad principles that would govern this combat until there is peace.

And then finally, I think we have to engage and support a peace process itself, because if there was no conflict, there wouldn't be civilian casualties. And at the end of the day, we think, we need to support a principal peace, and a peace that sees Afghans agree on arrangements under which they can live in peace and harmony.

That is our eventual objective. And we continue to engage, as we do with civilian casualties, with all parties, to support their engagement in the peace process.

Of course, it's not for us to make peace because we're not a combatant. We can't, as it were, as we say in Africa where I come from, the doctor can't take the medicine on behalf of the patient. In this case, Afghans have to engage with each other and not with third parties.

Thank you.
