

**PRESS CONFERENCE TRANSCRIPT****Release of UNAMA's 2016 Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict***[near verbatim]***Kabul, 6 February 2017**

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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:** Thank you very much for your attendance today. I will immediately pass the floor to our first speaker, the SRSG Tadamichi Yamamoto.

**Tadamichi Yamamoto:** Good morning. I welcome you and thank you for attending this press conference convened by UNAMA.

The 2016 Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict is produced by UNAMA with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva.

We have both endorsed the report and its findings and are satisfied that the findings adhere to a rigorous methodology and can be relied upon.

The report has been shared in advance with the Government of Afghanistan, the international military forces and the Taliban with the objective to promote change. Their responses are included as annexes in the report.

The report highlights the gruesome reality of the conflict and its impact on men and women, boys and girls throughout Afghanistan and the relentless suffering, year-on-year, with no respite for Afghan civilians.

I am deeply saddened to report, for yet another year, another increase in civilian casualties, another all-time high figure for the number of civilian casualties. In 2016 UNAMA documented 11,418 civilian casualties, an overall three per cent increase compared to the previous record-high documented in 2015.

I am particularly concerned about the alarming increase in child casualties, which Ms. Bell will address in her comments.

The killing and maiming of thousands of Afghan civilians is deeply harrowing and largely preventable.



All parties to the conflict must take immediate concrete measures to protect the ordinary Afghan men, woman and children whose lives are being shattered.

Much of the harm to civilians in 2016 resulted from disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks, as well as attacks directed at civilians by Anti-Government Elements.

In this regard, I strongly condemn the deliberate and indiscriminate targeting of civilians on a sectarian basis by Daesh (who also go by the acronym ISKL). They claimed the lives and maimed scores of civilians in 2016. Such acts are aimed at compounding the conflict and are directed at dividing the resilient Afghan society.

I must remind actors that such attacks, in particular, the intentional killings of civilians during armed conflict - are war crimes.

I urge all parties to the conflict to abide by their expressed commitments and take concrete steps to stop the preventable harm. What they must do is clear: Cease fighting in civilian populated areas and stop using civilian space, such as schools, hospital and mosques, for military objectives.

Notwithstanding these efforts, parties to the conflict must demonstrate commitment and resolve to reach a politically negotiated solution to this needlessly protracted conflict that has destroyed lives, broken families, induced displacement, caused trauma and sufferings beyond imagination.

My message is clear. The responsibility lies on the fighting parties to change practice on the battlefield in order to save civilian lives.

The loss of life and the harm to civilians from ground fighting demands immediate action by parties to the conflict to move the fighting out of civilian populated areas.

The indiscriminate and illegal use of improvised explosive devices by Anti-Government Elements must immediately cease.

UNAMA urges the Afghan government to formally adopt its National Policy on Civilian Casualty Prevention and Mitigation and to operationalize the policy as soon as possible.

At the core of those rules that parties to the conflict in Afghanistan must observe, without exception, is the obligation to distinguish civilians from fighters at all times.

Parties who fail to abide by those rules – in accordance with internationally accepted definitions – will be held to account for violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses.

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

Thank you



**Danielle Bell:** Thank you SRSG. Good morning. In 2016, UNAMA documented 3,498 civilian deaths and 7,920 injured, in total 11,418 civilian casualties, a three percent increase from 2015 and the highest number of civilian casualties recorded by UNAMA in a single year.

The mission recorded the majority of civilian casualties in Kabul province, followed by Helmand Kandahar, Nangarhar, Uruzgan, Kunduz and Faryab provinces.

UNAMA attributed 61 percent of civilian casualties to Anti-Government Elements; 24 percent to Pro-Government Forces; and 10 percent were attributed to ground engagements between Anti-Government Elements and Pro-Government Forces in which the casualties could not be attributed to one specific party.

The remaining five percent resulted mainly from unattributed explosive remnants of war.

Ground engagements remained the leading cause of civilian casualties, followed by improvised explosive devices, suicide and complex attacks, targeted killings, explosive remnants of war and aerial operations.

Ground engagements between parties to the conflict caused 4,495 casualties, a three percent increase from last year.

Anti-Government Elements continued to cause the majority of harm to civilians, causing almost 7,000 deaths and injuries, a two percent increase from last year.

The vast majority of harm attributed to Anti-Government Elements resulted from the indiscriminate and unlawful use of IEDs. I should note, since 2009, UNAMA has recorded close to 20,000 deaths and injuries from IEDs.

The mission documented 1,963 civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks, a seven percent increase from 2015 and the highest number of casualties recorded from this incident type in a single year.

Of concern, civilian casualties attributed to Daesh/Islamic State Khorasan province increased by ten-fold - mainly due to three attacks targeting the Shia Muslim religious minority in Kabul city.

The report documents a 46 percent increase in civilian casualties attributed to Pro-Government Forces in 2016, who caused 2,728 civilian casualties.

As observed in 2015, continued increases in ground fighting, particularly involving the use of indirect and explosive weapons in civilian areas led to the increase in civilian casualties attributed to Pro-Government Forces.

The mission also recorded increased civilian casualties from aerial operations, which almost doubled in 2016 and accounted for five percent of total civilian casualties.

The report also notes progress made by the Government to mitigate civilian casualties, including the National Policy on Civilian Casualty Prevention and Mitigation, and the



ratification of the Protocol V to the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons which concern explosive remnants of war.

The report highlights that the most vulnerable among society - women and children - remain the worst affected.

In 2016 UNAMA recorded 3,512 child casualties, a 24 percent increase from 2015, and the highest number of child casualties recorded by UNAMA in a single year.

The disproportionate rise in child casualties resulted mainly from an overall 66 percent increase in civilian casualties from unexploded remnants of war – 86 percent of those victims were children. Ground engagements and unexploded ordnance remain the leading causes of child casualties.

Women civilian casualties decreased slightly – by two percent – however, women casualties from ground engagements, aerial operations and unexploded ordnance increased.

In addition to loss of life and injury, the report documents continued abuses of human rights, mainly by Anti-Government Elements. For example:

The report documents 10 incidents of punishments administered by Anti-Government Elements against women for so-called “moral crimes” - including executions and public lashings.

UNAMA also continued to document incidents of threats and attacks against media workers, curtailing the right to freedom of expression.

In addition the report notes, concerns about the right to life, including the deliberate targeting of civilians by conflict actors, and an overall lack of accountability for human rights violations.

I encourage the all of you to read the report because it contains the voices of Afghans who experienced first-hand the human cost of this dreadful conflict, for example:

The mother whose new-born baby was killed by shrapnel during ground engagement; the girl who watched her friends killed by unexploded ordnance; and the man who lost a limb when his vehicle hit a pressure-plate IED.

As the SRSG stated, parties to the conflict must do more.

Improved civilian protection is only possible if parties to the conflict make more efforts to prevent civilian harm and ensure greater respect for the rights of all Afghans.

Thank you.



**Question:** Tolo News: “Do you believe that Daesh will be a big threat?”

**Tadamichi Yamamoto:** Thank you for the question. We have to look at the Daesh (IS) issue in terms of the future and also the current situation. Currently, as you know, the Daesh influence is limited. They are more coordinated in the eastern provinces, where, as you know, Afghan forces and coalition forces are fighting to contain them. But still their (IS) activities have resulted in enormous civilian casualties.

But we are looking at the situation of Daesh, not only in Afghanistan, but we look at it worldwide. And we have to be always alert to the possibility that the conflict elsewhere could have an impact on the future movement of Daesh. And I think nobody should doubt their ability – and so we should be alert and vigilant for whatever possibilities arise. And I don’t think anybody that the Afghan government, the Afghan people or the international community are blind to what they can do. And we certainly call upon Daesh, whatever they do, to not target civilians. In the past, actually in 2016, they targeted civilians when there was a peace demonstrations and people in a mosque – these are actual crimes of war.

**Question:** Radio Free Europe. You mention that there is again an increase in UNAMA civilian casualties this year too. And as everyone knows, there has been differences between the NUG, don’t you think that one of the reasons for an increase in the number of civilian casualties is for leadership within the national unity government.

**Tadamichi Yamamoto:** No I don’t think so at all. First of all the National Unity Government is fully committed to the decrease in civilian casualties and they are working closely on this -- there is no discrepancy whatsoever about their commitment to tackle it. We have been urging the Afghan government to do more – we have already touched upon the progress that they have made, but they can do more. We have made it quite clear that civilian casualties can be decreased – that is something that all the warring parties have to acknowledge and it is incumbent on them – it is up to the government and the other factions to reduce this number – and that is why we appeal to them. They have all committed to try to reduce casualties, but the reality is that it has only increased. Why? They say they are making efforts, alright. We see they are making efforts and it is not decreasing, therefore this is not enough. They should avoid using weapons which they know will have an impact upon civilians. The warring parties should not utilize facilities, civilian facilities, where they know that collateral damage will occur. They can do much more, and it is the same with the Afghan government. They have their policy and they have to implement it, and we hope that this will have a better impact next year.

**Question:** Mujib Mashal / New York Times – two brief questions. On the 65 percent increase in child casualties from explosive remnants. The data you guys have, does it clearly indicate that this is new remnants from the recent fighting or is it historic from the past decades? And Mr. Yamamoto, you described the conflict as protracted and needless and ahead of what is expected to be another bloody year, could you update us on where the contacts and efforts stand in regards to peace talks.

**Danielle Bell:** Mujeeb. Thanks for the question. Civilian casualties from unexploded or explosive ordinance of war increased by 66 percent – 86 percent of the victims were



children. My team tracked the location of every one of the detonations and the trend that we documented was a direct correlation between casualties of exploded ordinance and areas with the heaviest ground fighting. So to answer your question. The majority of the casualties resulted from new, unexploded ordinance from this military conflict.

**Tadamichi Yamamoto:** There are ongoing peace efforts. The final peace will have to be negotiated between the parties, between the Taliban and the Afghan government. And, you know that there are efforts being made. This is a complex issue. The efforts are being made but we have not yet seen tangible results, but I can assure you that efforts will continue to be made.

As you remember, as I reported to the Security Council in December that countries in the region should try to do more. Countries who have an interest can do more to create the environment whereby the sides can begin to explore how they can move the process forward.

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