



# AFGHANISTAN

## PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN ARMED CONFLICT ANNUAL REPORT 2020



UNITED NATIONS  
ASSISTANCE MISSION  
IN AFGHANISTAN



UNITED NATIONS  
**HUMAN RIGHTS**  
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

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KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

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Front cover: Three months after the start of the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban, an Afghan boy makes his way home through broken glass after rockets hit a residential area in Kabul, Afghanistan on 12 December 2020. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) claimed responsibility for the rocket attack which killed a civilian man and injured two others. ISIL-KP had also claimed responsibility for a rocket attack on Kabul less than a month earlier on 21 November that killed 10 civilians and injured 50 others.

Photo © EPA-EFE / Hedayatullah Amid

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After decades of conflict, millions of Afghans saw 2020 as a year promising a real prospect of peace. In February, the United States and the Taliban reached a bilateral agreement and in September, the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations formally commenced. Fighting continued throughout the year, but two temporary ceasefires during successive Eid holidays largely held, and there was a drop in the number of civilian casualties documented in the first nine months. In stark contrast, the last three months of the year marked an uncharacteristic rise in civilian casualties – a critical indicator of the nature of the conflict. The year ended with increased focus on levels of violence and diminishing hopes for lasting peace.

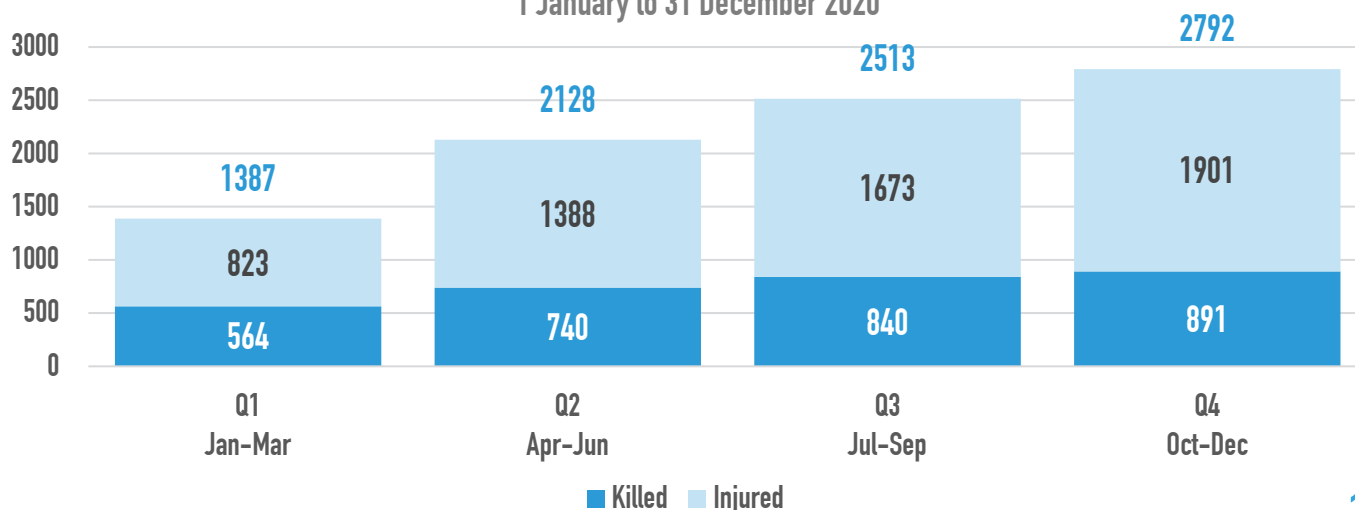
While reductions in the use of some tactics during the year ameliorated civilian harm significantly, this was contrasted by increases in civilian casualties from other tactics, resulting in continued high levels of civilian harm overall. Following the United States-Taliban agreement, UNAMA documented a reduction in civilian casualties from large scale attacks in urban centres by Anti-Government Elements, especially the Taliban, and from airstrikes by international military forces. However, this was partially offset by increases in civilian casualties from targeted killings by Anti-Government Elements, Taliban pressure-plate IEDs, and Afghan Air Force airstrikes, as well as a continuation of high levels of harm to civilians from ground engagements.

From 1 January to 31 December 2020, UNAMA documented 8,820 civilian casualties (3,035 killed and 5,785 injured), a 15 per cent reduction from the number of civilian casualties recorded in 2019 and the lowest number of civilian casualties since 2013. Although UNAMA welcomes the overall decline in civilian casualties, the rise in the last quarter of 2020 is of particular concern, especially as this corresponds with the formal commencement of the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations on 12 September 2020. This was the first time since it began systematic documentation in 2009 that UNAMA documented an increase in the number of civilian casualties recorded in the fourth quarter compared with the prior quarter. In addition, the last three months of 2020 marked a 45 per cent increase in civilian casualties in comparison to the same period in 2019, especially from the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and targeted killings. Of further concern is the worrying increases in civilian harm from tactics which exacerbated the environment of fear and paralysed many parts of society.

The harm caused to civilians in 2020 is a continuation of the pain and suffering from armed conflict that people of Afghanistan have endured for decades. The anguish caused by the armed conflict continued to be widespread and felt in cities and rural areas by people of all ages, genders, ethnicities and social-economic backgrounds. Beyond the physical harm, the armed conflict continued to

## Civilians Killed and Injured by Quarter

1 January to 31 December 2020



cause psychological trauma and poverty and left many civilians reliant on humanitarian aid and with limited access to education and justice. In 2020, the ongoing fighting also interfered with the necessary healthcare response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

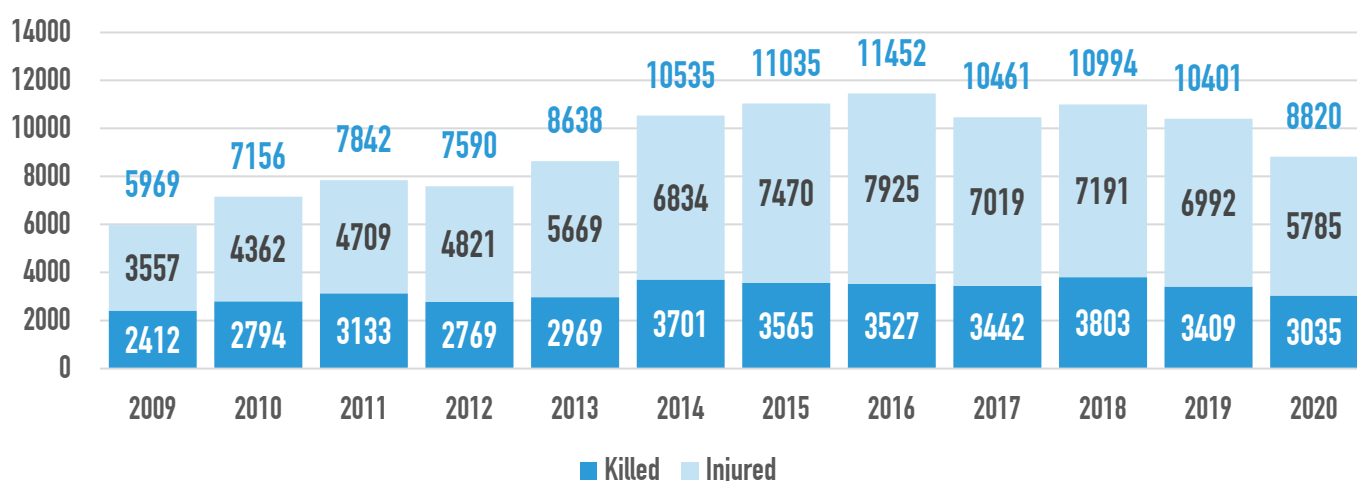
UNAMA reiterates that the best way to end the accumulating harm to civilians in Afghanistan is through a cessation of hostilities and a negotiated political settlement. The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, called for a global humanitarian ceasefire to fight the common enemy of COVID-19, to enable humanitarian assistance, and to save lives.<sup>10</sup> This was widely supported by people around the world,<sup>11</sup> Member States,<sup>12</sup> and the United Nations Security Council.<sup>13</sup> The international community also called for all parties to the Afghanistan conflict to agree to a ceasefire in order to create a more conducive environment for peace talks to succeed. While the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan repeatedly voiced its support for a ceasefire the Taliban consistently rejected all such appeals.

Throughout 2020, UNAMA documented fluctuations in the number of civilian casualties in parallel with evolving political events. The 'reduction in violence week'

**UNAMA reiterates that the only way to truly end the accumulating harm to civilians in Afghanistan is through a cessation of hostilities and a negotiated political settlement.**

prior to the signing of the United States-Taliban agreement in Doha on 29 February 2020, demonstrated that parties to the conflict have the power to prevent and limit harm to civilians when they decide to do so. Then, from March, concerns grew about rising levels of violence,<sup>14</sup> as UNAMA documented an increasing number of civilian casualties and attacks on health care personnel and facilities early in the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.<sup>15</sup> As the year continued, two temporary ceasefires during Eid al-Fitr (24-26 May) and Eid al-Adha (31 July-2 August) between Afghan national security forces and the Taliban greatly reduced the harm to civilians during those periods.

**Civilians Killed and Injured**  
1 January to 31 December 2009–2020



<sup>9</sup> See UNAMA Special Report: Attacks on Healthcare During the COVID-19 Pandemic (June 2020).

<sup>10</sup> See, video message of Secretary-General António Guterres on 23 March 2020, on <https://www.un.org/en/globalceasefire>

<sup>11</sup> See, [https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/global\\_ceasefire\\_loc/](https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/global_ceasefire_loc/)

<sup>12</sup> See, UN News, 170 signatories endorse UN ceasefire appeal during COVID crisis, on: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1066982>

<sup>13</sup> See, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2532 (2020).

<sup>14</sup> See for example: <https://unama.unmissions.org/unama-calls-parties-further-reduce-violence-and-work-towards-ceasefire>; and [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/76616/Afghanistan:%20Statement%20by%20the%20Spokesperson%20on%20the%20need%20for%20an%20immediate%20and%20permanent%20ceasefire](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/76616/Afghanistan:%20Statement%20by%20the%20Spokesperson%20on%20the%20need%20for%20an%20immediate%20and%20permanent%20ceasefire).

<sup>15</sup> See UNAMA Special Report: Attacks on Healthcare During the COVID-19 Pandemic (June 2020).



On 12 September, negotiation teams representing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban officially started the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations in Doha, Qatar. This, however, did not improve the situation for civilians. In the three months that followed, for the first time since it began systematic documentation in 2009, UNAMA documented an increase in the number of civilian casualties recorded in the fourth quarter of the year compared with the third quarter. In addition, this period marked a 45 per cent increase in civilian casualties in comparison to the same three months in 2019, especially from the use of IEDs and targeted killings.<sup>16</sup> In October, civilian casualties were the highest of any month in 2020, and in November UNAMA documented the highest number of civilian casualties of any November since it started systematic documentation in 2009.<sup>17</sup> In December, the population was confronted with a streak of targeted killings, referred to by many as “assassinations”, of civilians, including media workers, civil society activists and members of the judiciary and the civilian government administration, as well as civilian family members of combatants.<sup>18</sup>

Anti-Government Elements continued to cause the majority of civilian casualties, amounting to 62 per cent of all civilian casualties in 2020. While UNAMA attributed fewer civilian casualties to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) and the Taliban, the number of civilian casualties caused by undetermined Anti-Government Elements (those which UNAMA could not attribute to a specific Anti-Government Element group) more than doubled in comparison to the year prior.

Pro-Government Forces caused a quarter of civilians killed and injured (25 per cent) in 2020. The number

UNAMA documented a record number of women killed in 2020, as women deaths increased by 13 per cent; women and children together comprised 43 per cent of all civilian casualties

of civilian casualties attributed to international military forces decreased significantly, with practically all occurring in the first two months, and almost none for the remainder of the year after the United States and the Taliban reached their agreement on 29 February. At the same time, 2020 saw the highest number of civilian casualties attributed to the Afghan National Army, including the Afghan Air Force, since UNAMA started systematic documentation of civilian casualties in 2009, mainly because of increased civilian casualties from airstrikes and ground engagements.

UNAMA remains concerned about the detrimental impact of the conflict on women and children, who together made up 43 per cent of all civilian casualties in 2020, including 1,146 women casualties (390 killed and 756 injured – 13 per cent of all civilian casualties) and 2,619 child casualties (760 killed and 1,859 injured – 30 per cent of all civilian casualties). Of concern, 2020 marked the highest number of women killed recorded in a single year since UNAMA began systematic documentation in 2009, as the number of women killed increased by 13 per cent in 2020.

<sup>16</sup> From 1 October to 31 December 2020, UNAMA documented 2,792 civilian casualties (891 killed and 1,901 injured) a 45 per cent increase of civilian casualties in comparison to 1,931 (726 killed and 1,205 injured) in the same period in 2019; UNAMA also documented a 69 per cent increase of civilian casualties from non-suicide IEDs and a 62 per cent increase in civilian casualties from targeted killings in comparison to the same period in 2019.

<sup>17</sup> In October 2020, UNAMA documented 1,257 civilian casualties (400 killed and 857 injured) and in November 2020, UNAMA documented 965 civilian casualties (302 killed and 663 injured).

<sup>18</sup> UNAMA notes that such attacks continued into January 2021 as this report was being drafted. While it falls outside of the reporting period, in late January and early February 2021, accusations and denials of responsibility, especially for some of the most recent incidents, were made publicly by various actors. The Government has reported that persons arrested in connection to some of these attacks have links to Anti-Government Elements, including the Taliban. On 31 January 2021, 15 diplomatic missions in Kabul condemned the continuation of assassinations, kidnappings, and destruction of vital infrastructure, stressing that the Taliban bears responsibility for the majority of this targeted violence (statement available at <https://af.usembassy.gov/statement-on-continuation-of-assassinations-kidnappings-and-destruction-of-vital-infrastructure/>, last accessed 11 February 2021). On 1 February, the Taliban denied their involvement (statement at <https://alemarahenglish.net/?p=42271>, last accessed 11 February 2021). On 15 February, UNAMA released a report on Killing of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, and Media Workers in Afghanistan, covering also such incidents which have not been reported in the protection of civilians framework due to the inability of UNAMA to establish their conflict nexus.

UNAMA also notes with concern that in 2020, Pro-Government Forces were responsible for more child deaths than Anti-Government Elements.<sup>19</sup>

Women and children continued to suffer harm from conflict-related sexual violence, including rape and *bacha bazi*.<sup>20</sup> Although these acts are criminalised, limited access to justice and a culture of silence, shame, and victim-blaming continued to pose significant challenges to accountability efforts.

UNAMA continued to document the recruitment and use of children by parties to the conflict, mainly the Taliban. UNAMA also continued to verify incidents in which the Afghan national security forces and pro-government armed groups were responsible for the recruitment and use of children, although notable progress has been made by the Ministry of Interior to halt and prevent underage recruitment and use through the Child Protection Units in Afghan National Police recruitment centres. UNAMA is also concerned that an increase in unemployment and poverty due to the COVID-19 pandemic have made children more vulnerable to recruitment and use by parties to the conflict, especially because they are forced to seek employment to support their families.<sup>21</sup>

UNAMA documented an increase in the number of attacks on hospitals and related personnel by parties to the conflict in 2020, especially in the second and fourth quarters of the year. UNAMA repeatedly emphasised the importance of protecting healthcare facilities and workers, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These attacks exacerbated the already significant barriers to providing adequate health care for people in Afghanistan. One of the most atrocious attacks of 2020 was the 12 May attack on a maternity ward in PD13 of Kabul city, when several armed men forced their way into the hospital, deliberately moving towards the maternity ward, shooting at civilians and throwing hand grenades. The attack caused 46 civilian casualties (23 killed and 23 injured), many of them were mothers who had just given birth. The responsible party behind this attack remains undetermined.

## Interviews with victims identified how little was done by parties to the conflict to acknowledge the harm, and to protect their rights in the aftermath of civilian casualty incidents.

The enjoyment of the right of children to education continued to be compromised by the armed conflict in 2020, especially due to attacks on schools and teachers. This was mainly due to direct attacks by Anti-Government Elements, including the destruction of schools through arson and IEDs, and targeted killings of teachers.

Through more than 130 interviews with victims in 2020, UNAMA documented the grave impact of the conflict on the social, economic, and cultural rights of victims. Many victims interviewed were displaced, were unable to participate in cultural or religious activities, and had financial difficulties due to the loss of a family breadwinner and because of healthcare expenses. These consequences were especially detrimental for the many victims who struggled with physical disabilities and psychological trauma.

In addition, the victims that UNAMA interviewed demonstrated how little was done to provide them with effective reparations, to acknowledge the harm done, and to protect their rights in the aftermath of civilian casualty incidents. Only in exceptional circumstances did the responsible party to the conflict reach out to a victim to recognise harm done or to apologise. Victims were often not aware of whether investigations were being conducted into the incident that caused harm, and few victims received compensation. Many victims indicated, however, that non-recurrence of such incidents is of major importance and expressed their desire for peace.

<sup>19</sup> In 2020, UNAMA attributed 337 child deaths to Pro-Government Forces and 281 child deaths to Anti-Government Elements.

<sup>20</sup> *Bacha bazi* is a harmful practice whereby boys are exploited by wealthy or powerful men for entertainment, particularly for dancing and sexual activities; it is criminalized in the revised Penal Code, which came into effect in February 2018.

<sup>21</sup> See, UNICEF, Humanitarian Action for Children, Global COVID-19 chapeau (December 2020).

## Incident Types Causing Most Harm to Civilians

The 15 per cent decrease in the total number of civilian casualties in 2020 was primarily driven by fewer civilian casualties from Anti-Government Element suicide attacks (including complex attacks), international military airstrikes, and search operations by Pro-Government Forces. At the same time, UNAMA documented an increased number of civilian casualties attributed to Anti-Government Elements from non-suicide IEDs and targeted killings, including so-called “assassinations” of civilians. UNAMA also documented a rise in civilian casualties attributed to the Afghan National Army from ground engagements and from Afghan Air Force airstrikes.

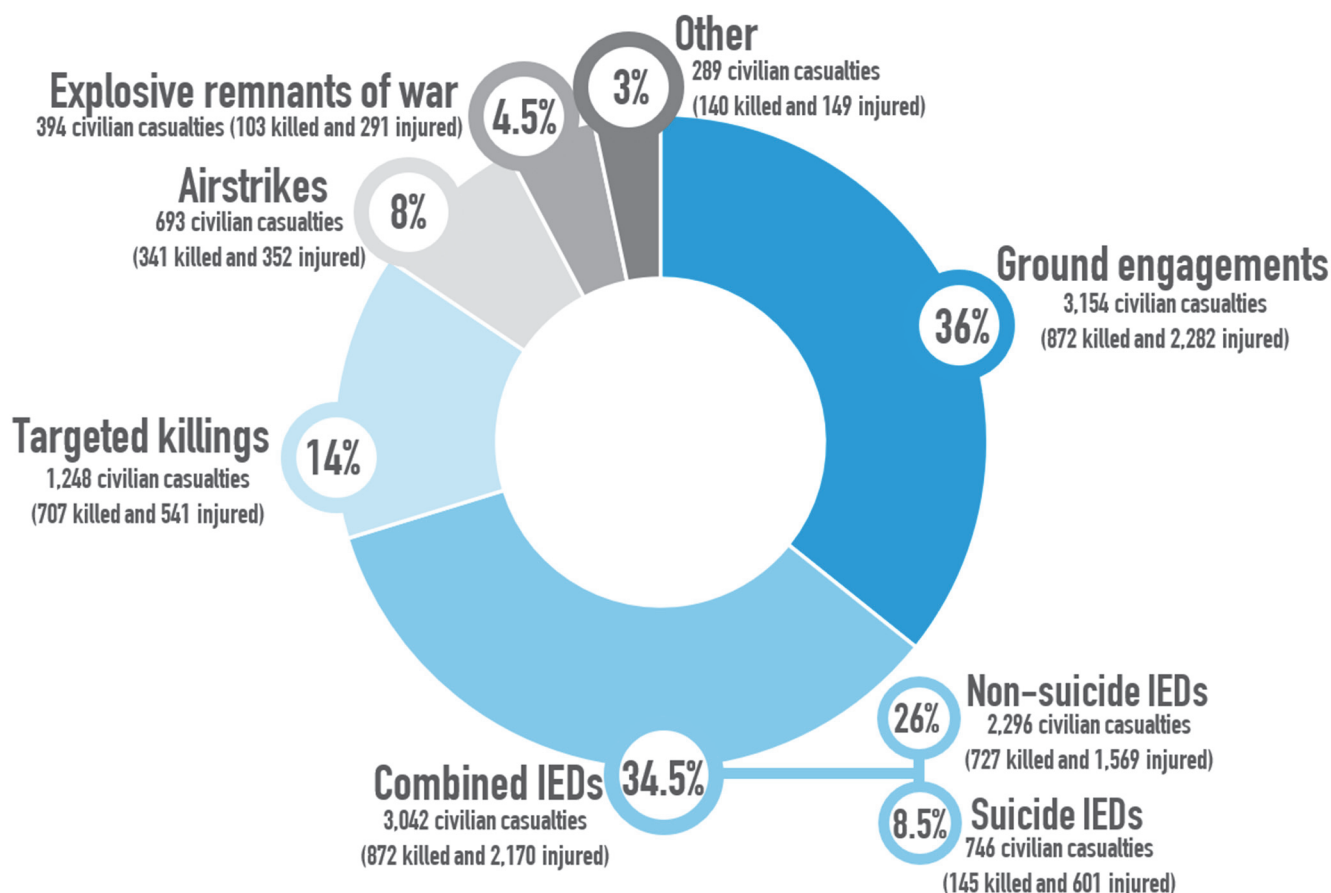
In 2020, for the first time since 2016, ground engagements were the incident type causing the most

civilian casualties, responsible for 36 per cent of the total.<sup>22</sup> From 1 January to 31 December 2020, ground engagements caused 3,154 civilian casualties (872 killed and 2,282 injured) – a slight increase compared with 2019, mainly driven by an increase in civilians killed.<sup>23</sup> Civilian casualties from ground engagements occurred mainly through the use of indirect fire, including from artillery shells, mortars and rockets in populated areas.

The use of both suicide and non-suicide IEDs by Anti-Government Elements caused more than a third of all civilian casualties, amounting to 3,042 civilian casualties (872 killed and 2,170 injured). This marked a 30 per cent decrease in the number of civilian casualties from these devices in comparison to 2019, mainly

### Civilian Casualties by Incident Type

1 January to 31 December 2020



<sup>22</sup> From 2017 to 2019, IEDs (the combined use of suicide and non-suicide IEDs) were the leading cause of civilian casualties.

<sup>23</sup> In 2019, UNAMA documented 3,061 civilian casualties (766 killed and 2,295 injured) from ground engagements.

caused by a 64 per cent drop in civilian casualties from suicide attacks, including complex attacks. Non-suicide IEDs caused 26 per cent of all civilian casualties in 2020. The number of civilians killed by non-suicide IEDs increased by 43 per cent in 2020 in comparison to 2019, while the number of injured civilians decreased by 10 per cent.

Both suicide attacks and non-suicide vehicle-borne IEDs (often referred to as “truck bombs” or “car bombs”) caused many civilian casualties in populated areas, often due to the wide-area effects of their powerful explosions. These devices were also directed against civilians and civilian objects, which is prohibited under international law. Even when directed at legitimate military objectives in populated areas, these methods can have an indiscriminate effect, making such use a serious violation of international humanitarian law which may amount to war crimes.

Amongst non-suicide IEDs, of most concern was the use of pressure plate IEDs, which caused 35 per cent more civilian casualties than in 2019, with the Taliban responsible for almost all incidents. UNAMA once again calls on the Taliban to ban the use of pressure-plate IEDs and recalls previous commitments the Taliban made in this respect. These devices, as used in Afghanistan, are victim-operated and inherently indiscriminate, and function as anti-personnel landmines. The use of such weapons violates international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

Targeted killings, including so-called “assassinations” of civilians, caused 1,248 civilian casualties (707 killed and 541 injured) in 2020, marking a 45 per cent increase in the number of civilian casualties from these attacks compared with 2019. This included the deliberate killing of civilians, including media workers, civil society activists and members of the judiciary and the civilian government administration, as well as civilian family members of combatants.<sup>24</sup> UNAMA attributed 94 per cent of these civilian casualties to Anti-Government Elements. Of these, 761 civilian casualties (459 killed and 302 injured) were from targeted killings attributed to the Taliban, a 22 per cent increase from 2019.<sup>25</sup>

## Civilian casualties attributed to Anti-Government Elements from non-suicide IEDs and targeted killings, including so-called “assassinations”, of civilians, increased, as did civilian casualties from Afghan National Army ground engagements and Afghan Air Force airstrikes.

Civilian casualties from airstrikes decreased by 34 per cent in 2020, in comparison to the year prior, amounting to 693 civilian casualties (341 killed and 352 injured). As international military forces limited their air operations after the United States – Taliban agreement, civilian casualties caused by their airstrikes decreased by 85 per cent. In contrast, the Afghan Air Force increased its air operations and caused 76 per cent of all airstrike civilian casualties in 2020. UNAMA documented a 126 per cent increase of civilian casualties caused by Afghan Air Force airstrikes, the highest number of civilian casualties UNAMA has attributed to these airstrikes since it started systematic documentation in 2009.

In 2020, explosive remnants of war caused 394 civilian casualties (103 killed and 291 injured), 24 per cent fewer casualties than in the year prior. This unexploded or abandoned ordnance remained extremely harmful to children in particular, who comprised 80 per cent of all civilian casualties from this incident type. Explosive remnants of war also caused harm to civilians during the “reduction in violence week” at the end of February and during the two Eid ceasefires, demonstrating their lasting harm even when there is not active fighting. In order to protect children from harm, the identifying, mapping and defusing of unexploded and abandoned ordnance must be a priority.

<sup>24</sup> These figures include both targeting of civilians and civilians incidentally impacted from targeting of other individuals. See Glossary.

<sup>25</sup> In 2019, UNAMA attributed 626 civilian casualties (388 killed and 238 injured) from targeted killings to the Taliban.



## Attribution of Civilian Casualties to Parties to the Conflict

From 1 January to 31 December 2020, UNAMA attributed 62 per cent of all civilian casualties to Anti-Government Elements, with 45 per cent attributed to the Taliban, eight per cent to ISIL-KP, and nine per cent to undetermined Anti-Government Elements.

Pro-Government Forces caused 25 per cent of civilian casualties in 2020. UNAMA attributed 22 per cent of civilian casualties to Afghan national security forces and one per cent each to international military forces, pro-government armed groups, and undetermined or multiple Pro-Government Forces, respectively.

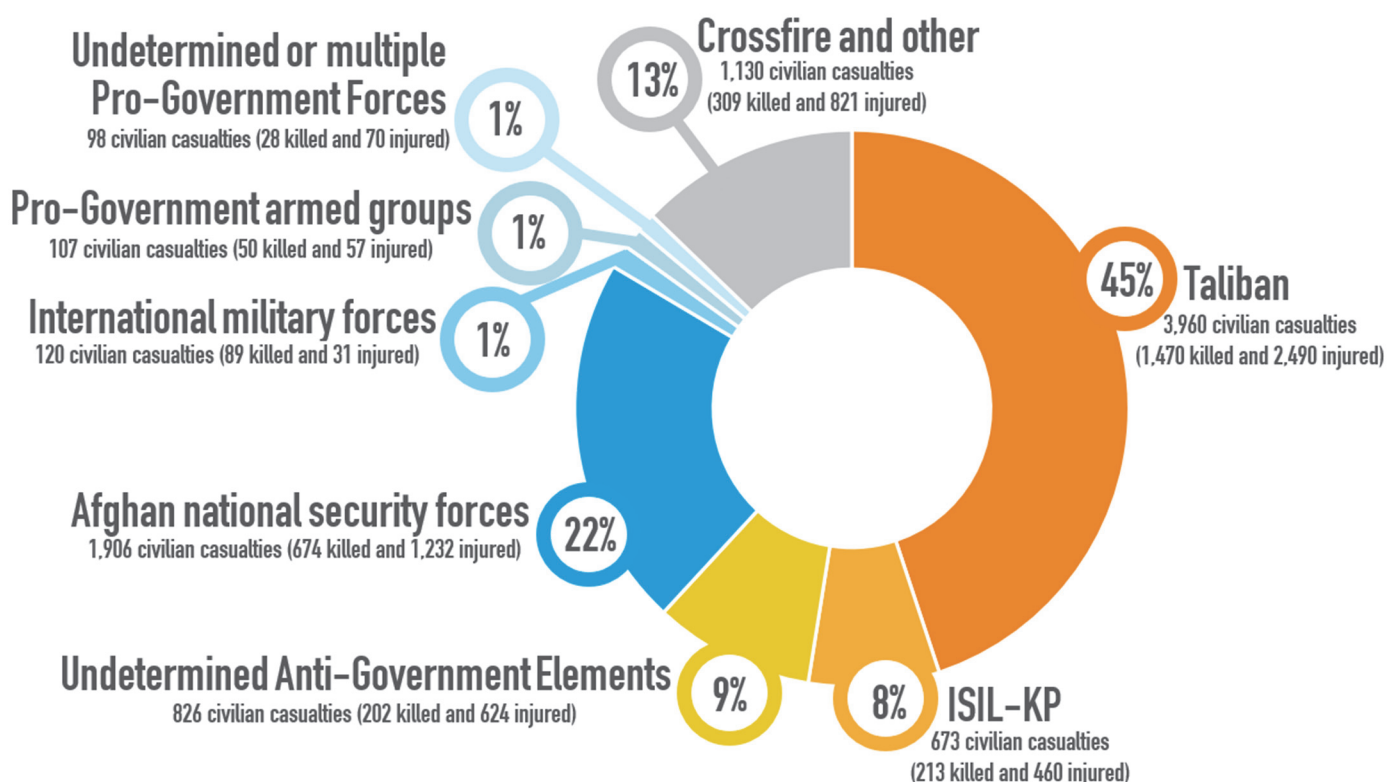
Nine per cent of civilian casualties were caused by ground engagements between Anti-Government Elements and Pro-Government Forces that could not be attributed to a specific party. Cross-border incidents attributed to Pakistani Military Forces caused less than two per cent of civilian casualties. The remaining two per cent of civilian casualties could not be attributed to any party and consisted mostly of civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war.

### Anti-Government Elements

In 2020, Anti-Government Elements were responsible for 5,459 civilian casualties (1,885 killed and 3,574 injured), 15 per cent fewer civilian casualties than the year prior. The decrease in civilian casualties in comparison to 2019 was mainly due to fewer civilian casualties from suicide attacks.

UNAMA attributed 3,960 civilian casualties (1,470 killed and 2,490 injured) to the Taliban in 2020. This marked an overall decrease of 19 per cent from 2019, comprising a 31 per cent decrease in civilians injured, partially offset by a worrying 13 per cent increase in civilians killed. In 2020, the Taliban was responsible for an increase of 43 per cent in the number of civilians killed by non-suicide IEDs, especially through the use of victim-activated pressure-plate IEDs and vehicle-borne non-suicide IEDs, compared with 2019. The number of civilian casualties from targeted killings in 2020 attributed to the Taliban increased by 22 per cent

**Civilian Casualties by Incident Type**  
1 January to 31 December 2020



## UNAMA documented a worrying 11 per cent increase in civilians killed by the Taliban, contrasted by a 31 per cent decrease in civilians injured

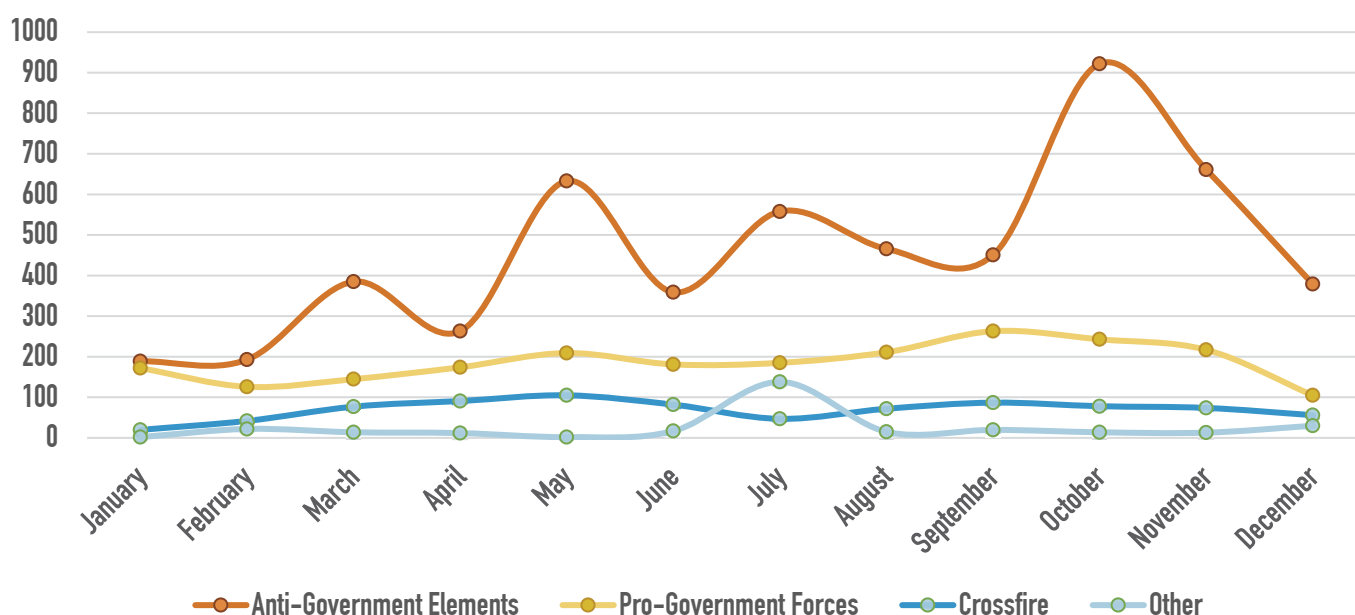
from the year prior. Conversely, in 2020, UNAMA attributed 79 per cent fewer civilian casualties to the Taliban from the use of suicide attacks, including complex attacks. Civilian casualties from ground engagements caused by the Taliban also decreased by 10 per cent in 2020 in comparison to the year prior, mainly due to the dearth of the 2019 civilian casualties that had been attributed to the Taliban for election-related violence.<sup>26</sup>

For the second year in a row, UNAMA continued to document a decrease in the number of civilian casualties attributed to ISIL-KP. In 2020, UNAMA attributed 673 civilian casualties (213 killed and 460 injured) to ISIL-KP, a 45 per cent decrease in comparison to 2019. The vast majority of ISIL-KP civilian casualties were caused by mass-casualty suicide attacks and mass-shootings in Kabul and Jalalabad.

Throughout 2020, UNAMA documented an increase in civilian casualty incidents caused by Anti-Government Elements that it could not attribute to either the Taliban or ISIL-KP, recorded as undetermined Anti-Government Elements. This coincides with fewer recorded claims of responsibility by the Taliban and ISIL-KP. From 1 January to 31 December 2020, UNAMA attributed 826 civilian casualties (202 killed and 624 injured) to these undetermined Anti-Government Elements, a 158 per cent increase in comparison to 2019.

Of particular concern, in 2020, UNAMA continued to document attacks by Anti-Government Elements that deliberately targeted civilians, through the use of various incident types, such as assassinations, suicide and non-suicide IEDs, abductions, as well as cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment under the guise of enforcing decisions of their parallel justice structures. These attacks deliberately targeting civilians included attacks against members of the judiciary, healthcare workers and facilities, aid workers, human rights defenders, journalists and civilians working for the civilian government administration. UNAMA also continued to

**Civilian Casualty Timeline by Party to the Conflict**  
1 January to 31 December 2020



<sup>26</sup> In 2019, UNAMA attributed 391 civilian casualties (70 killed and 321 injured) from election-related violence to the Taliban.

document attacks by ISIL-KP against religious minorities, especially the Shi'a Muslim population, most of whom also belong to the Hazara ethnic group; the Sikh religious minority; and the Sufi Muslim religious minority.

## Pro-Government Forces

From 1 January to 31 December 2020, Pro-Government Forces were responsible for 2,231 civilian casualties (841 killed and 1,390 injured), a decrease of 24 per cent in comparison to the year prior. This decrease was mainly caused by the near dearth of civilian casualties from international military forces airstrikes and Pro-Government Forces search operations after the signing of the United States – Taliban agreement on 29 February.

From 1 January to 31 December 2020, Afghan national security forces caused 1,906 civilian casualties (674 killed and 1,232 injured), a 13 per cent increase in comparison to 2019 and their highest level of civilian casualties recorded since 2016. The number of civilian casualties attributed to the Afghan National Army (including the Afghan Air Force) in 2020 was the highest since UNAMA started its systematic documentation of civilian casualties in 2009. Other branches of the Afghan national security forces caused fewer civilian casualties, including the National Directorate of Security Special Forces, whose search operations caused far fewer civilian casualties after the signing of the United States – Taliban agreement.

UNAMA attributed 120 civilian casualties (89 killed and 31 injured) to international military forces, a decrease of 85 per cent and the lowest number of civilian casualties since UNAMA started its systematic documentation in 2009. In the first two months of 2020,

2020 saw the highest number of civilian casualties attributed to the Afghan National Army (including the Afghan Air Force) since UNAMA started its systematic documentation of civilian casualties in 2009, accounting for 16 per cent of all civilian casualties this year.

international military forces airstrikes caused a similar number of civilian casualties as in 2019. Thereafter, following the signing of the of the United States – Taliban agreement, civilian casualties from international military forces airstrikes all but ceased.

In 2020, Pro-Government Armed Groups caused 107 civilian casualties (50 killed and 57 injured), a 42 per cent decrease in civilian casualties in comparison to 2019. Fewer civilian casualties attributed to the Khost Protection Force and the Paktika-based “Shaheen Forces” drove this decrease in civilian casualties.

UNAMA also remains concerned about the continuation of incidents in which Afghan national security forces and pro-government armed groups intentionally harmed civilians, including incidents which amounted to summary executions.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

UNAMA reiterates that a cessation of hostilities and a negotiated political settlement to end the conflict is the best way to protect civilians. As the fighting has continued amidst the beginning of the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNAMA offers the following

recommendations to the parties to the conflict to support their efforts to protect civilians, prevent and mitigate civilian harm, and uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law:

## All Anti-Government Elements

- Cease the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of all IEDs, particularly in populated areas;
- Cease the use of indirect fire (mortars, rockets and grenades) in populated areas;
- Immediately cease the deliberate targeting of civilians, provide immediate and clear instructions to all combatants concerning the protected status of civilians, including members of the civilian government administration, members of the judiciary, journalists, schoolteachers, first responders, aid workers and human rights defenders, including the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission so that it may continue to carry out its work unimpeded and unharmed;
- Cease all threats and attacks against media, and any other acts impacting freedom of the press and freedom of expression;
- Continue to take measures to implement directives prohibiting the recruitment and use of children and ensure accountability for those commanders who recruit and use children;
- Cease all attacks and threats against health care facilities and health care workers, including polio vaccinators and campaigners; and provide unimpeded access to medical and humanitarian workers, especially those that work in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Cease all attacks and threats against schools and education personnel, and ensure that children's access to education is not impeded by military operations;
- Immediately cease any act of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment on individuals.

## The Taliban

In addition to the recommendations listed for all Anti-Government Elements:

- Ensure that all directives and orders comply with international humanitarian law, particularly the principles of precaution, distinction and proportionality and hold accountable those conducting indiscriminate attacks or attacks deliberately targeting civilians and civilian objects. Apply a definition of 'civilian' that is consistent with international humanitarian law; enforce statements by Taliban leadership that prohibit attacks against civilians and in civilian-populated areas; implement directives ordering Taliban members to prevent and avoid civilian casualties; and publicize Taliban civilian protection policies;
- Immediately stop using victim-operated IEDs such as pressure-plate IEDs, which function as improvised anti-personnel mines, and uphold previous commitments made concerning the banning of anti-personnel mines;
- Cease all actions which place civilians at risk, especially co-location of military objectives and civilians;
- Ensure access for humanitarian deminers in territory under their effective control;
- Strengthen the work of the Commission for the Prevention of Civilian Casualties and Complaints, including the relationship of its leaders with organizations doing work on civilian casualties and increase its focus towards preventing civilian casualties, in addition to investigating incidents, including through training for fighters on international humanitarian law.



## All Pro-Government Forces

- Conduct a timely and comprehensive review of target verification procedures and precautionary measures, including pattern of life assessments, particularly in the context of airstrike operations, with a view to evaluating their effectiveness and producing recommendations for improvement;
- Strengthen post-operation reviews and investigations following allegations of civilian casualties with a view to identifying broader patterns of harm, improving operational practice, and ensuring accountability; prioritize the finalization of the improved Government civilian casualty review mechanism and ensure it has adequate resources to function properly;
- Increase transparency of investigations into civilian casualty incidents and communicate results to civilian victims and their relatives; ensure adequate, effective, and prompt reparations are provided for harm suffered; prioritize implementation of the revised Government system for provision of victim assistance in order to promptly clear the backlog of pending applications and address new claims from victims; and consider additional non-monetary forms of redress, such as apologies and acknowledgement of harm, to restore trust amongst affected communities.
- Cease the use of indirect fire (artillery shells, mortars, rockets and grenades) and other explosive weapons with wide area effects, including air-delivered munitions, in populated areas; continue to develop and improve tactical directives, rules of engagement and other procedures in relation to the use of armed aircraft;
- Increase efforts to protect religious leaders, as well as religious minorities, such as the Shi'a Muslim and Sikh religious minority population from sectarian-motivated attacks, human rights defenders and media personnel, including through the enhancement of existing protection and security measures, strengthening preventative mechanisms, and ensuring better coordination and communication with affected communities;
- Continue to strengthen the capacity of the Afghan national security forces to effectively conduct counter-IED operations, including IED exploitation, and ensure that the Government dedicates all necessary resources to ensure the full implementation of the national counter-IED strategy;
- Strengthen age assessment and vetting procedures, and expand the functions of the Child Protection Units in the Afghan National Police to incorporate proactive monitoring at check posts to prevent and stop incidents of use of children in combat and non-combat roles by members of the Afghan national security forces;

## Government of Afghanistan

In addition to the recommendations listed for all Pro-Government Forces:

- Bring the National Directorate Special Forces, which appear to fall outside of the official Governmental chain of command and to be coordinated with foreign actors, under full control of the National Directorate of Security; immediately disband and disarm all pro-Government armed groups, including the Khost Protection Force and Shaheen Forces, or formally incorporate their members into the Afghan national security forces following a robust vetting procedure;
- Develop and improve tactical directives, rules of engagement and other procedures that uphold international humanitarian law and international human rights obligations, increase the protection of civilians, transparency and accountability; and investigate all allegations of human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations with a view to ensuring accountability;
- Put in place mechanisms for re-integration of children formerly associated with parties to the conflict, including those detained on national security related charges and children rejected through the Afghan National Police Child Protection Units;
- Enforce the provisions in the revised Penal Code concerning *bacha bazi* and ensure accountability for crimes of sexual violence against children, including through adopting in Parliament the Law on the Protection of Child Rights of 2019, which criminalizes child recruitment, the use of children and the practice of *bacha bazi*, and by establishing effective investigation and disciplinary mechanisms for commanding and recruitment officers found responsible for child recruitment and use, as well as strengthening psychosocial support for survivors of sexual violence.

## International Military Forces

In addition to the recommendations listed for all Pro-Government Forces:

- Continue to fund the Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team to enable it to conduct in-depth and timely assessments of civilian casualty incidents, and to expand the functions of the team to allow for engagement in lessons learned exercises.
- Thoroughly review and strengthen current tactical protocols to prevent civilian casualties, particularly in the context of airstrikes carried out in support of forces on the ground who come under attack and strikes carried out on structures in any context.
- Continue to conduct post-operation reviews and investigations, and ensure transparency following allegations of civilian casualties from airstrikes and other operations, with a view to identifying broader patterns of harm, improving operational practice and promoting accountability, and ensuring adequate, effective and prompt reparations are provided for harm suffered.
- Strengthen efforts to review incidents of civilian casualties with Afghan counterparts where they

result from partnered operations; provide further training and assistance to Afghan national security forces in conducting effective battle damage assessments; and increase engagements with affected communities, including through Afghan partners, on incidents in which civilian casualties have occurred.

- Continue to support the Government of Afghanistan in implementing the National Policy on Civilian Casualty Prevention through the continued provision of training, resources and related support to the Afghan national security forces at the policy, operational and tactical levels, in particular to put in place mitigation measures to prevent harm to civilians from indirect fire, explosive weapons with wide area effects and armed aircraft.

## United States Forces – Afghanistan (USFOR-A)

In addition to the recommendations listed for all international military forces:

- Review and revise targeting policies towards individuals who are neither directly participating in hostilities nor performing a continuous combat function for an armed group to bring them in line with international humanitarian law.