

UNAMA**United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan**

Strategic Communication and Spokespersons Unit, Kabul, Afghanistan

Transcript<http://unama.unmissions.org>**PRESS CONFERENCE (near verbatim transcript)****Launch of Annual Report 2012: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict****Ján Kubiš, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan; Georgette Gagnon, Director of UNAMA Human Rights; and Nazifullah Salarzai, National Spokesperson****Kabul – 19 February 2013**

Nazifullah Salarzai, National Spokesperson: Good morning media representatives. I would like to introduce our speakers of today's press conference. His Excellency Ján Kubiš, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan; Georgette Gagnon, UNAMA Human Rights Director will both be jointly launching the 2012 annual report on protection of civilians in armed conflict. With no further delay, over to the SRSG.

Ján Kubiš, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan: Thank you very much. *Salaam Alaikum*. Good morning everybody. I am very pleased that we can meet after some months unfortunately. The fault is on my side. The schedule was very busy. But nevertheless, we will try to re-establish our regular contacts and press conferences in the course of this year. It will be necessary also due to our agenda in support of Afghanistan here in the country in 2013.

We are very pleased to be with you to launch our 2012 civilian casualty report, regular report. But, before doing so, I would like to make two or three very brief comments. You are not surprised that among the top priorities of my mission in the coming period of one-year-and-half is all what we can do in support of the Presidential election 2014 in Afghanistan.

Only recently in Afghanistan we welcomed a team of experts from the UN Headquarters from the UN Secretariat – a senior advisor to the Secretary-General on elections and the head of the Electoral Assistance Division in the Secretariat, Mr. (Craig) Jenness. They worked here with the authorities, with the Independent Elections Commission, with political parties and leaders, with civil society representatives and with the international community. Now they are preparing a number of recommendations as to how the United Nations will support the process of the elections 2014.

The moment we will have the recommendations back from New York, I will convene a press conference and you will be informed because it is necessary that the public, that the society of Afghanistan is fully informed about what are the positions of United Nations with regard to elections. But even now, I can share with you that there are certain strategic principles that will

guide us in our work and support to Afghanistan with regard to elections. Among them is the principle that the ultimate goal of the elections and its outcome that is broadly accepted by Afghans. Participation and inclusivity must be a priority when organizing the election.

Also the technical process of preparation and voting must be unbiased and sound enough to defend the outcome of the elections. It must not only be unbiased and sound in substance but also be perceived by the people of Afghanistan as unbiased and sound.

Given the problems in the past and certain challenges because of the current approach towards the election, it is essential, it is crucial to ensure that anti-fraud measures should be both robust and strategic. The second point that I would like to make is that the Security Council of the United Nations will in mid-March discuss the work and mandate of UNAMA and of the UN family here in Afghanistan.

We are preparing ourselves for discussions together and in close cooperation with the Government of Afghanistan and last week we had high-level meeting between the Government of Afghanistan and heads of UN funds and programmes and agencies.

It was very open and very frank dialogue and in diplomatic language it means that both we heard a lot of criticism of how we work and how we should improve our performance. Also on our side, we made a number of points with regards to how the Government both in Kabul and both in its relations with provinces, with districts, should improve the performance.

But the most important message and conclusion of the meeting is that both the Government of Afghanistan and us as the UN family will like and will continue working here in Afghanistan. The wish of Government is not to see less of United Nations after 2014 but perhaps even more simply working differently more in support of the priorities of Afghanistan to benefit the people of Afghanistan.

The third and the last point that I would like to make before moving into the civilian casualties is to refer to our previous report, dealing with the situation and ill-treatment of detainees in the places of detention in Afghanistan. In that report, we unfortunately had to register that there are numerous cases of ill-treatment and torture of detainees in different places of detention in Afghanistan. We were highly encouraged by the reaction of Mr. President and the Government of Afghanistan. As you know, Mr. President ordered an investigation commission. The commission worked and delivered 12 or 11 recommendations and Mr. President eventually issued a decree in line with these recommendations but in a way fully in line with our recommendations from our report. We will work together with the Government of Afghanistan to see that the situation is improved. But, another thing is what is important. We produce a report not because of producing a report, but we try to see a change and we were encouraged that the Government engaged with us and first of all engaged with its own structures to deliver change in the situation.

And we very much hope that also our report on civilian casualties will have the same effect on all the parties concerned: the Government, ISAF and the insurgency including the Taliban.

We work in a critical dialogue, sometimes very tough dialogue with the Government and with ISAF to continuously improve the situation and we see results. We are ready to engage with anti-Government forces, with the Taliban, in a dialogue on human rights, on humanitarian issues, on protection of civilians. We need to deliver a change of the situation. We cannot accept that civilians are being killed by improvised explosive devices (IED). We cannot accept

that increasingly suicide bombers including brain washed children are used to kill civilians. This is not an Islamic way how to treat brothers, how Afghans should treat Afghans.

Madam Georgette Gagnon.

Georgette Gagnon, Director of UNAMA Human Rights: I will present some of the facts and figures that we have documented in our report, and of course the full report is available at the back of the room and also in Dari and Pashto on UNAMA website. Everything is in the report. I will make some brief highlights.

In 2012, UNAMA documented 7,559 civilian casualties - 2,754 civilian deaths and 4,805 civilian injuries - which is very important part of the situation. This year for the first time in six years, we recorded a decline in civilian deaths of 12 per cent.

This reduction in civilian death in our view comes from four things: first, ground engagement between the parties caused fewer casualties. There was a decline in suicide attacks by Anti-Government Elements. There was a reduced number of aerial operations by international military forces, and there were measures taken by both the Afghan forces and international forces to reduce harm to civilians. They actually made a change we think based on much of our efforts and the efforts of other Afghans to work with them to minimize civilian harm.

Within this overall reduction, conflict-related violence increased as it affects women and girls. We saw an increase of 20 per cent of women and girls killed in the conflict. And the sad reality is that they were killed or injured while going about their daily work, their daily business.

We found that civilian casualties by Anti-Government Elements (AGEs) increased while casualties by Pro-Government Forces (PGFs) decreased over the 2012.

Eighty-one per cent of civilian deaths and injuries were attributed to Anti-Government Elements, eight per cent to Pro-Government Forces, and the remainder, about 11 per cent could not be attributed to a specific party to the conflict.

One trend we noticed this year, which is disturbing, is that while the decrease in civilian casualties is very much welcome, civilians and civilian communities continue to be threatened - their lives, livelihoods and well-being. And we attribute this to increasing threats associated with the presence and re-emergence of a number of armed groups across the country.

Civilians also faced an increase in threats, intimidation and interference with the rights to education, to health, to justice and freedom of movement from AGEs. These AGEs increased their targeting, their attacks on civilians which is illegal under international law and also under other laws. They also carried out attacks without regards to human life.

As already stated that the biggest killer of civilians remained improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which were planted in public places, killing more civilians and injuring them.

Civilian casualties from targeted killings by AGEs increased by 108 per cent compared with 2011, and this include targeted killing of civilians perceived to be supporting the Government, Government employees, religious leaders, tribal elders and persons involved in peace and reconciliation efforts were targeted.

For the PGFs, we found that they were responsible for 581 civilian casualties, which is a decline of 46 per cent from 2011.

Civilian casualties from aerial operations reduced by 42 per cent, but remained or was the cause of most civilian deaths and injuries from Pro-Government Forces, in particular international military forces.

Regarding the Afghan Local Police (ALP), from the majority of people we interviewed across the country in 94 districts that have ALP presence, most communities reported an improvement in security. However, we still documented human rights violations by ALP in some districts.

We also found some inconsistent compliance with the policies and procedures that guide the recruitment and the vetting of the Afghan Local police.

So while overall as we said there has been a reduction in civilian deaths, the situation for civilians is still very difficult in many communities and many thousands of Afghans are still affected by the armed conflict. We are calling again on all concerned to redouble their efforts, increase their efforts to protect civilians, to take concrete acts to stop the killing and the injuring in this year and beyond. Thank you.

Nazifullah Salarzai: It's now time for your questions. Please introduce yourself and one question at a time.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

Shamsad TV [translated from Pashto]: One question with two parts. Can you exactly tell us the number of civilians killed by the international military forces? And secondly, what kind of measures UNAMA can take in order to influence the concerns (*inaudible*) in order to avoid or decrease the civilian casualties?

Nazifullah Salarzai: That's not all the concerned sides. That's only for the insurgents. What measure can you take?

Georgette Gagnon: Well, for the insurgents and also for the others, the report has 14 recommendations in it, and on the insurgent side, our biggest or our most critical recommendation is that they stop targeting civilians. It is a war crime. It is against the international humanitarian law to actually target civilians. And the Taliban in particular seem to use a definition of civilian that is not consistent with international law and their obligation under this law. So that's the first thing.

The second thing is to stop the use of what we call indiscriminate illegal victim-activated IEDs. These are IEDs that if you step on them, anybody steps on them or any civilian minibus steps on them, they blow up and they cause very much damage. It is legal and appropriate to target a military target but not civilians. So, this is our biggest recommendation to the Taliban in particular and other Anti-Government Elements using these kinds of IEDs and these tactics.

The second question was civilian casualties caused by the international military, not ANSF (Afghan National Security Forces) and international military as I understand it. International military, we documented 491 civilian casualties.

Afghanistan Times [translated from Dari]: My question is addressed to Mr. Kubiš. You just mentioned your support with regards to the elections. Yesterday, the IEC expressed its concern about some certain unsecured areas in the country and said that we would not be able to provide electoral materials or ballot boxes in those areas. I would like to know what kind of other measures that UNAMA thinks can be taken in order to address that problem.

Ján Kubiš: This is a question of ensuring security of the process. It is first of all the matter of the Afghan Government. But of course, relying on the necessary support of notably the international military forces, ISAF because ISAF will be still in the country although leaving the country quickly, but they still will be in the country during the election in 2014. I am aware that the Government, in cooperation with all other parties, is preparing serious set of measures to ensure that in the overwhelming majority of the country of Afghanistan, there will be a possibility to open polling stations and to manage them during the day of the elections. And we are confident and it will be possible to create conditions for the majority of the population to take part in the voting.

BBC: My name is Karen Allen, BBC news. Given the downward trend in the casualty figures, does this indicate that the counter-insurgency is working or that this phase in developments one would expect this kind, with fewer operations, expect the figures to go down anyway, just a broad trend?

Ján Kubiš: As explained before there are several reasons that we see behind the decrease in civilian casualties as such. Part of it is indeed the dynamics of the conflict. But what is of more concern, at the same time is there is an increase in civilian casualties caused by Anti-Government Elements, notably as regards using such indiscriminate and illegal tactics and weapons that are in a way landmines, pressure-plate improvised explosive devices that are indiscriminately hitting civilians. This is a war crime and people will be held responsible in the future for this war crime.

Another extremely concerning figure. There is a 700 per cent increase, 700 per cent, in the killing and harming of civilians, and I'm stressing civilians who are perceived to be working in favour of the Government – different officials, tribal leaders, religious leaders, those that are speaking in favour of peace. This is a war crime and people will be punished for this war crime.

And, similarly suicide bombers, again targeting civilians. How else would you describe the situation when a brainwashed 16, 17 years old teenager goes to a mosque and kills civilians praying, including children. You will see in our report a definition of anti-Government forces. It's a much broader definition than just Taliban. Under this you can find even criminal groups actively engaged in war activities against the Government. But the most, the strongest and the most organized component of those that are fighting the Government is the Taliban movement and that's why my appeal to the Taliban movement: Talk to us. Let's work. Redefine your definition of civilians and then follow the prescriptions of the international humanitarian law when waging unfortunately waging military activities.

Nazifullah Salarzai: The last question is Subel Bhandari from DPA.

DPA: Subel with Deutsche Presse, to Mr. Kubiš. What is happening with the Track II diplomacy that UNAMA was trying to pursue a couple months ago? And to Ms. Gagnon, the trend of targeted killing that has seen a 700 per cent increase as you have said in the report, can you give us a general trend and breakdown of your finding of targeted killings?

Ján Kubiš: As you know UNAMA has been engaged in different activities in support of peace and reconciliation, working among others, but not exclusively, with the High Peace Council (HPC) but also with different other parts of the society in Afghanistan: political forces, and indeed we are in touch with the insurgency as well. One part of our activities is to facilitate dialogue among different Afghan parties, engaging again the Government, HPC, political parties, civil society, representatives of the insurgency as appropriate. We do it in different ways and in different places, for example through the People's Dialogue all around the country in different provinces and districts of the country so it's not only Kabul-based high level political discussions. But of course our main intention is to support Afghan-led processes and we registered very clearly that at the end of last year and notably after the visit of His Excellency President Karzai to the United States it was decided that indeed the main track, the primary track, would be to try to open an office in Doha for direct talks between the High Peace Council and authorized representatives of the Taliban. And therefore, at this point in time, would like to see that this is going to happen as soon as possible and based on the results of this effort we will readjust our own activities for support for peace and reconciliation processes.

Georgette Gagnon: On the targeted killings, as stated, we found a 108 per cent increase from targeted killings. This included 1,077 civilian casualties, 698 deaths, and 379 injuries. Now within that proportion, the killing of civilian Government employees went up by 700 per cent. That's the breakdown.

Ján Kubiš: I believe that we are at the close of this press conference, but I would like to encourage you please to read the report, not only the press release. It's in our opinion an interesting reading and I would like to thank you very much for your attention. *Tashakor.*