

UNAMA**United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan**

Strategic Communication and Spokespersons Unit, Kabul, Afghanistan

Transcript<http://unama.unmissions.org>**PRESS CONFERENCE TRANSCRIPT****Release of UNAMA's Annual Report 2013: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Afghanistan****(Near-verbatim; edited for clarity)****Government Media & Information Center, Kabul – Saturday, 8 February 2014****Participants:**

- **The United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ján Kubiš**
- **Director of UNAMA's Human Rights Unit, Georgette Gagnon**
- **UNAMA Spokesperson, Nazifullah Salarzai**

Nazifullah Salarzai: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our press conference. Today's conference is about the launch of the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2013 Report, which will be launched by His Excellency Ján Kubiš, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, and Georgette Gagnon, the UNAMA Human Rights Director. With no further ado – over to H.E. Ján Kubiš.

Ján Kubiš: Salam Alaikum. A good afternoon to all of you. Welcome. Thank you for coming to this press conference. I am really glad that you have such an interest and I am not surprised because the topic of civilian casualties is very important for all of us.

Again we are before you, as already a tradition in the past several years, to bring the news about what is the situation with civilians that are caught in this conflict in Afghanistan that is unfortunately ongoing. We brought you this report with the news, with the analysis. I am very sorry to say that the news is not good news. It is bad news, it is sad news. Because the trend has been reversed in comparison with what we were telling you here last year. Unfortunately, we have bad news here.

Unfortunately, civilian casualties in Afghanistan's armed conflict rose by 14 per cent in 2013. We, UNAMA, documented 8,615 civilian casualties out of that 2,959 civilian deaths and 5,656 injured in 2013, marking a seven per cent increase in deaths and a 17 per cent increase in injuries compared to 2012. You remember in 2012 we were very happy to report the decrease, not anymore.

Civilians are being killed, increasingly women and children that are bearing the brunt and you will get information about the concrete figures about that. Civilians are being targeted and I would like to repeat what I said before, if civilians are being killed and notably if they are targeted as civilians, this is a crime and it might constitute a war crime and eventually justice will come sooner or later. There are groups that are boasting about killing civilians, are making statements how good it is that civilians are being targeted and killed. These groups should understand this might border on war crimes. It is a violation of their obligations according to international humanitarian law and they will be held accountable sooner or later.

The majority of civilians killed are result of the activities and acts and tactics of anti-Government elements and I would like to make, and bring to your attention, this is a broad notion it is not only the Taliban; there are many other groups that are operating and we label them as anti-government elements.

But there is another trend, as the national security forces now are in the lead of military operations more and more civilians are injured and killed as a result of direct engagement between the anti-Government elements and the Afghan National Security Forces and indeed also international military causes death of civilians. But I would like to stress the overwhelming majority is because of the activities and acts of the anti-Government elements and this is the only elements that are targeting civilians, directly targeting civilians. This is a major difference between them and those that are unfortunately killed in action, for example, of pro-Government forces against anti-Government elements.

My last point before giving the floor to my colleague Georgette Gagnon, who will walk you through the report and the findings, is that we try to be as precise and as accurate as we can be. So before issuing this report, we shared the draft for equal time, with equal request, with the Government of Afghanistan, the respective institutions, with ISAF [International Security Assistance Force], with international forces, and with the Taliban movement. We asked them to give their comments and we were ready, in case, indeed, it is in harmony with our findings and with our approach to correct or complement, add the facts to the report.

I am grateful to all the three groups of our interlocutors that they engaged with us, although I have to say that the Taliban movement, referring to the shortage of time, didn't provide too specific comments. I assume they will provide their reaction later but they are ready, and I am once again confirming to engage with everyone because it must be our common interest to reduce the burden on the civilians of this conflict here in the country.

Thank you.

Georgette Gagnon: Good morning. I would urge all of you to read the report closely. There are many facts figures and graphs that will help you understand how the conflict took an unrelenting toll on Afghan civilians this year.

Regarding women and children, the report documented that there were the most civilian deaths and injuries this year for women and children since 2009. Women casualties rose by 36 per cent compared to last year and children's casualties rose by 34 per cent. Women and children were by and large killed and injured by improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The second leading cause of injuries and deaths to women and children were these ground engagements that the SRSF spoke about.

Increased use of IEDs, as we said, was the leading cause of civilian casualties and all IED tactics that is IEDs placed on roads, placed in parks, placed in bicycles and suicide attackers that use IEDs all these together caused one half of all the civilian casualties this year.

Targeted killings were also on the increase and these caused quite a number of deaths across the country. As noted, targeted killings of civilian Government employees, religious leaders, mullahs, people supporting the peace process and others who support or express support for the Government increased. These are clear violations of humanitarian law.

The report highlights the increase in civilian casualties by pro-Government forces compared to 2012. And most of these were caused by Afghan security forces in ground operations, in these ground engagements that occurred. But it is important to note that again in ground engagements the anti-Government elements were responsible for the most civilian casualties within those fights between the two parties.

The other point we want to make about the pro-Government forces is we did document a few instances of Afghan forces during ground operations and searches in some areas committing property destruction and some looting, particularly in Faryab and Kunduz provinces. Regarding the Afghan Local Police we received many reports of improved security in districts where the Afghan Local Police are. However, we still documented a rise in civilian casualties from these forces.

A final point about pro-Government forces: we did see an increase in casualties from explosive remnants of war. These are unexploded ordnance that is left on military bases and high explosive ranges. We would like to see these ranges cleared and marked so that casualties can be prevented.

Finally, we would just highlight as is highlighted in the report, behind every civilian casualty is a man, woman or child's lives and we want you to take that into account because we have many accounts in the report of how every family and community is affected by a death of a child or a man or a woman.

Our view is the reduced civilian suffering and future civilian casualties, together with improvements in human rights protection, should be the core benchmarks of improved stability and efforts toward peace in this security and political transition in 2014.

Thank you.

Nazifullah Salarzai: It is now time for your questions. Please introduce yourself and one question at a time and please tell us who your question is addressed to – either to SRSG [Kubiš] or Georgette.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

BBC [translated from Dari]: Mr. Ján Kubiš, in your remarks you mentioned about those who are targeting civilians this will be considered as war crime and they will be prosecuted one day. In your opinion, how could it be possible in the presence of those war criminals who are still in power and that still have free access in targeting the civilians?

Ján Kubiš: I am not sure that I understood fully your question.

Nazifullah Salarzai: The question is that the lack of trial for those who have committed the war crimes, what do you think that how has this affected the increase in civilian casualties.

Ján Kubiš: Well, as I said, there is time for everything but nothing should be forgotten, and eventually justice will be delivered. My main message is to the perpetrators: Understand, it might be next year, five years, ten years from now but nothing is forgotten. Notably the families of those who lost their lives will never forget this and they have their rights for justice.

RFE Pashto [translated from Pashto]: You mentioned that you shared the draft equally with Government interlocutors as well as with the Taliban with the same request. Taliban always consider these kinds of reports as biased or one-sided.

Ján Kubiš: Yes indeed we shared the draft, as I said, giving equal time to all the parties. But we understand that perhaps, for the Taliban movement, it is not that easy to respond as quickly as for our other interlocutors that are here in Kabul and we can engage with them. That's why they provided general comments. Even from the general comments, we see certain discrepancies and differences in approaches and opinions. We will continue working with the Taliban in the future to address the points where we disagree and when they are in violation of international humanitarian law. It is obligatory also for them.

But I am grateful to them that they express their willingness to engage with us even on the issues which we don't see equally. They have different opinion and we have different opinion. I hope very much that this dialogue will continue and will bring the movement to better understanding that would then reflect itself in action that would decrease civilian casualties and hopefully will stop targeted killings of civilians.

So, we take it very positively that they responded and we hope very much that we will indeed continue with even more vigour, but with better results in this dialogue.

Al Jazeera English: We are saying, according to you, an increase in bullet wounds or casualties of civilians in the cross-fire between Afghan forces and the Taliban. Does that reflect a change in the fight whereas in the past there was a cat-and-mouse game between foreign forces and the Taliban? Are the Taliban more confident now coming out into a more conventional warfare? Is that why we are saying an increase in, say women and children here being caught in the cross-fire?

Ján Kubiš: I believe that we always documented by categories what is behind civilian casualties including what is behind, what is the cause – whether it is the anti-Government forces or pro-Government forces – and different categories like IEDs etc. What we witnessed and we think that it is more because of the more pronounced engagement of the Afghan National Security Forces with the Taliban. We witnessed that the cross-fires are now taking heavier toll. We documented this heavier toll. This is how we see the situation. It's a direct impact of the lead of the Afghan National Security Forces in the military operations.

This is the fact we are encouraged to see in our dialogue and contacts with the different ministries of the Government that they recognize this and they are ready to work themselves to limit this kind of impact. They are asking also for assistance of international community in, for example, training etc. indeed to create conditions that would limit the civilian toll.

VOA Dari [translated from Dari]: You mentioned that the overall civilian casualties increased in 2013. I would like to know what is the leading cause of the increase in civilian casualties. Is it because of increased activities of the armed opposition? Is it because of the weakness of the national security forces? Or it's the reason because of the withdrawal of the international military forces from Afghanistan?

Georgette Gagnon: The leading cause, as documented in the report, is the increased use of IEDs and similar tactics by the anti-Government elements. This went up by about 14 per cent compared to last year. And the second leading cause was these ground engagements between the forces that caused more civilian casualties than the previous year. That's what we were able to analyze from the data collected from across the country.

Ján Kubiš: Just again to bring to your attention that indeed the report attributed 74 per cent of total civilian deaths and injuries in 2013 to anti-Government elements using these kinds of tactics as described. Just to make it very clear who is the main cause and driver of civilian casualties.

NPR: Usually there have been clash between your report and government reactions. What I mean is that today I talked with one official and he was refusing the percentage that you have released. I just want to have the sense of your conduct with Afghanistan officials. How you conduct and what is their reaction usually when you release this? I mean there have been usually such reactions.

Ján Kubiš: Well I would say this is a bad story; this is a tragedy; so no one likes to be implicated in bad story and in tragedy. It is valid for the Government, ISAF and anti-Government elements. But we patiently discuss with our interlocutors, we bring our arguments, we bring our data, this is not hearsay, these are verified data, checking and rechecking them and then we are coming with our report and therefore in spite of the fact that sometimes we are criticized by everyone, we stand behind our data.

Salam Watandar [translated from Dari]: Many thanks. I am Sayyar Kakar from Salam Watandar. My question is directed to Mr. Kubiš. He said that civilian casualties have increased by 14 per cent mainly due to IEDs and suicide attacks by the Taliban and similarly held responsible both the Government and Afghan National Army. Could you tell us how much the international military had their role in civilian casualties?

Georgette Gagnon: It is in the report clearly but of total civilian casualties, that is the total, we found that only three per cent were attributed to international forces; three per cent of the total civilian casualties.

Ján Kubiš: Every civilian killed is one too many. We are working also with our international partners coming with recommendations, how to reduce, how to prevent that civilians are being killed. And they are responsive and, if I am not wrong, there was a decrease in the number of civilian casualties in the past year caused by the activities of the international military forces; decrease of 10 per cent [in] airstrikes for example.

BBC: Can I ask you... do you think this is the worst year for civilian casualties? The report talks about 2011, 2009. Are the figures actually worse than those years? You say comparable but is it worse now than it was then?

Ján Kubiš: It is basically matching if I will put it like this, and it is of major concern so we are very much worried that is why we are coming with this very strong message. Because we produced numbers for 2013 but if I look at preliminary numbers as regard January 2014, this month we see again an increase month on month, January 2013 compared with January 2014, an increase of approximately eight per cent with an increase in January of killed civilians of 27 per cent. This is not acceptable.

BBC [follow-up question]: So can I ask you why do you think this is happening then? Do you think that the ANA simply are not being careful enough? I know a lot of these are done due to IEDs and ...sorry [translator interrupts].

Ján Kubiš: We speak about tactics and we try to bring to your attention different tactics but let's not forget, in 2013, 74 per cent caused by the anti-Government elements and the trend is the same if not worse for the first month of this year.

VOA Pashto [translated from Dari]: I would like to know the view of UNAMA with regards to the assassination of campaign supporters. Because shortly before starting the campaign some campaign supporters were killed. I would like to know if this trend will continue. Should we expect something like a deteriorated situation at the end? And as the other colleague suggested what is your assessment and your concern with regards to the interference of the Government in the campaigns of some of the candidates.

Ján Kubiš: Although this press conference is about civilian casualties but indeed election officials, campaigners, voters, female searchers, candidates – all these are civilians. That's why, yes indeed there is a place and space for this question in this meeting.

We, of course, issued a press statement immediately after the killing of these two officials. We rejected and hope that it will not be continued. I will not speculate about what might be but I hope that all the people of this country and, including the anti-Government elements, understand how critically important it is to have the elections on time, on the 5th of April and how the people of the country here in their majority would like to have the elections as good as possible under the given conditions, not perfect but as good as possible under the given conditions, and how strongly the authorities of the country, institutions, the people and the candidates are working to get these elections. We will support them. So this is the best response. Let's not speculate, let's work for good election on the 5th of April because this is critically important for the future of this country.

And let's not forget that it's the responsibility of the candidates to guide their supporters to act in such a way so as the elections are as good as possible, as fair as possible. It is their responsibility as well. But it is a shared responsibility of the institutions and authorities of the country that are to held accountable in case that they would allow violations of the constitution, laws or regulations that are here to guide the election campaign and voting and then adjudication of the complaints. Because this is Afghan-managed elections so that's why it is the responsibility of these two camps: candidates and their camps in one side, and institutions and authorities of the country on the other side.

Thank you.

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