

PRESS CONFERENCE (near verbatim transcript)

Staffan de Mistura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, and

Georgette Gagnon, Director of Human Rights, UNAMA

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Staffan de Mistura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan: *Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim.* Thank you for coming. I think it is the right time, I'm sorry to say, for addressing issues relating to civilian casualties. We do have a report – every six months. This report is particularly important in our opinion because it is taking place at the very time when perhaps we are in the middle of the so-called Spring offensive and at the same time in the middle of the most intense part of the so-called surge. So I will leave Georgette Gagnon, our director of human rights issues, to elaborate on the report and I will then make some additional comments. Thank you.

Georgette Gagnon, Director of Human Rights, UNAMA: Good morning. The human cost of the Afghan conflict for Afghan civilians rose in the first six months of 2011. Afghan civilians experienced a 15 per cent increase in conflict-related civilian deaths over the past first six months compared to the same period in 2010. This dramatic growth was mainly due to the use of landmine-like pressure plate improvised explosive devices or IEDs by Anti-Government Elements. We at UNAMA documented 1,462 civilian deaths for this period, with 80 per cent attributed to Anti-Government Elements, an increase of 28 per cent in civilian deaths from the same period in 2010.

A further 14 per cent of civilian deaths over the last six months were attributed to the Pro-Government Forces – this is the Afghan National Security Forces and International Military Forces. This was down nine per cent from the same period in 2010. And six per cent of civilian deaths we could not attributed to any party to the conflict.

As UNAMA documented a few weeks ago, May 2011 was the deadliest month for Afghan civilians since 2007. In June of this year, a further 360 civilian deaths were recorded.

June also saw an all-time high in the number of security incidents recorded in a single month and the highest number ever of IED attacks recorded in a one-month period.

IED and suicide attacks, tactics used by Anti-Government Elements, accounted for nearly half of all civilian deaths and injuries in the first six months of this year. IED attacks, with 444 victims, were the single largest killer of Afghan civilians and caused 30 per cent of all civilian deaths.

Air strikes remained the leading cause of civilian deaths by the Pro-Government Forces, with an increasing proportion of those attributed to helicopters. Seventy-nine Afghan civilians were killed by air strikes, which is a 14 per cent increase in civilian deaths from air strikes compared to the same period in 2010.

Civilian deaths from ground combat and armed clashes in the first half this year increased by 36 per cent compared to the same period last year. Two per cent of all civilian casualties occurred as a result of night raids, which is down slightly from the first half of 2010. We documented 30 civilian deaths during night raid operations in the past six months.

UNAMA found that over the past six months the Anti-Government Elements expanded their use of victim-activated pressure plate IEDs which act like anti-personnel land mines and cannot distinguish between civilians and a military target. This tactic of using these IEDs is a violation of the laws of war and humanitarian principles. Two thirds of all IEDs used in Afghanistan, and the vast majority that kill civilians, are designed to be triggered by a weight – that is the weight of a human, and in some cases that of a child. Meaning that these IEDs – these victim-activated pressure plate IEDs – function effectively as massive anti-personnel mines. Clearly any civilian who steps on or drives over these IEDs has no defence against them and little chance of survival.

Targeted killings or assassinations of Afghan civilians by Anti-Government Elements continued at last year's high rate. We documented 191 targeted killings compared to 181 in the same period last year.

We would also like to draw your attention to the accounts from Afghan civilians of how the conflict affects them which is laid out in the report and also in our press release. And we want to draw your attention in particular the feeling of many Afghans civilians that they are caught in the middle – caught between two sides and have few places of refuge and little protection. I will just read to you what one civilian from Marja told us.

"The Taliban come to any house they please, by force. Then they fire from the house and then ISAF and the ANA fire at the house. But if I tell the Taliban not to enter, the Taliban will kill me. So, what is the answer? Either ISAF kills me or the Taliban kills me. The people cannot live like this."

Thank you.

Staffan de Mistura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan:

Thank you Georgette. And thank you, to you and your team made up of internationals and Afghans. There are more than 70 of our colleagues working on this. I have a few comments. The first one is, if one day the UN will be remembered for its contribution to the future and present Afghanistan, we hope and believe it is also going to be because the UN has, through our human rights team, kept alive the concerns of all Afghans on issues of human rights and certainly, in particular, the issue about civilian casualties.

That is why we take very seriously this issue and this report which as you know comes out every six months. It is particularly important for us because it is taking place in the middle of what is considered the most acute period of the surge and the most intense period of what the Taliban call their Spring/Summer offensive. Summer is not over yet.

Four months ago we issued a report on the previous civilian casualties. And we made a special appeal on that occasion because we had indications from all sides that the forthcoming Spring and Summer would be very intense in terms of conflict.

And we have appealed to all sides to actually make a special effort to reduce what they call sometimes incidents but in fact often are simply civilian casualties being penalised. We saw the trend going in the wrong direction and in May, in fact three weeks ago, not in May, three weeks ago, we indicated through a press release that Georgetown issued that May had been the month where the most civilian casualties had occurred since the time that the UN had started to record civilian casualties, which means 2007. We have the figures now: 1,462, and that has been during the last six months. Most of them, close to 80 per cent, 79-point-something per cent, have been caused by indiscriminate type of tactics such as these pressure-plate landmines. And they can be pressured by a child of 10 kilos, up to 100 kilos: in other words, anyone who is unlucky enough to pass by will be killed and has been killed.

Now, let me elaborate a little bit more about some issues that perhaps are not totally on your radar screen. We have been in touch with the Taliban about the issue of civilian casualties and we are in touch with them. And they've been contributing by indicating some figures and facts that according to them are inaccurate. And we've taken into due account all this when they are confirmed by factual numbers on our side and factual reports on our side. On the other hand, what we need from them is factual changes. In other words a reduction, an elimination of civilian casualties caused for instance by these pressure-plate, indiscriminate IED's.

They will not like this report. They will complain about it. Our message remains the same. They can contribute to correct factual mistakes or inaccuracies and we are actually giving a chance to ISAF to do the same. But they also have to contribute, not to us but to the Afghan people, the very people that they belong to - the Taliban are Afghans - to reduce civilian casualties particularly with this item which is clearly indiscriminate and mostly hits civilians.

ISAF is also being reminded by us about the fact that civilian casualties is something that we all, and they should too, take very seriously. And indeed we have seen from what Georgetown's report is indicating there has been an effort and there has been a reduction. But we are also aware that for an international force which is meant to protect civilians, one civilian killed, even by mistake, is one too many. You must have heard about this very sad event which took place yesterday near Khost. We are unable to make a comment on it now because there is still an investigation, but it is just a reminder on how sometimes that this happens just before our own report and as a reminder that this is a sad event.

Let's go back to the Taliban. Because regardless of whether they are happy or unhappy about it, and I know they will be unhappy, these figures speak clearly. Seventy-nine per cent of the civilian casualties are caused by them. These are not just figures. These are names, these are people, these are men, women, elderly people, children, these are Afghan people, as you could see from one of the many examples that we have been collecting in our interviews.

Let's remember one element that we often, including me, sometimes have been forgetting. But on 6 October 1998 Mullah Omar issued an edict and a decision to appeal and implement the banning of mines in the country, and all over the world, but particularly in this country which has seen so much of it. And these pressure-plate landmines are the worst of the landmines because as we heard although they are meant to hit a tank they are actually being triggered most of the time by a minibus by a car or even by a person walking, and therefore is statistically by far more likely it will be an Afghan civilian. It is not by coincidence that the ICRC [International Committee

of the Red Cross] Director of Operations, who is visiting Afghanistan on this date, has issued an appeal and an element of their concern is along the same lines – civilian casualties, civilian Afghans.

In less than 16 days, *inshallah*, we'll have the holy month of Ramadan in Afghanistan, in the whole world. Let us appeal to the Taliban. At least let's send a message to the Afghan population that during this holy month of Ramadan IED's, pressure-plate IEDs, will not be placed. Let's send a signal in the right direction. Let's give them a sign of hope that if as we all hope there will be negotiations, there will be discussions, there will be a political solution, meanwhile we will not have so many victims dying until peace is achieved here and most of them, if not all, civilians. The fact that the Taliban have been discussing this issue of civilian casualties and the fact we have been receiving already a beginning of their own contribution to address this issue gives us we want to believe the hope that they are serious in also addressing the actual fact produced by these landmines.

Thank you. Any questions? We are ready to take some questions. Please identify yourself.

Reuters: You just mentioned that the Taliban said they plan to address the issue of civilian casualties. How are they trying to do that? And on the issue of more deaths from airstrikes and helicopters, is there a particular region where those have increased?

Staffan de Mistura: I'll answer the first part and Georgette the second. This report is not just meant to be an academic exercise. That's why when we prepare it what we need is to have a chance and give a chance for those who we are addressing in the report – that is, the Taliban, ISAF and the Government – to actually contribute to it.

Which means – correct – we're not perfect. We try to get as much information as we can. We do have good sources because luckily we are all over the country and we do have Afghan and international presence, but there can be mistakes. And we give a chance, in this case as you referred to, to the Taliban to correct inaccuracies.

Example – if they claim that they didn't do what was reported, they should then indicate who did it and on what basis they believe someone else did it. There are sometimes indications that a certain attack was done by bandits. Well, let's be specific. When we ask ISAF to correct if they can some indication, they also are expected to be specific – factual comments, not rhetorical comments. And we will take those things into account.

As I said, but we're not expected to just have a report that's only academic and therefore the bottom line is not only correcting the facts in the report but correcting the attitude. In other words, if the report, as we believe, has had an impact on ISAF – there have been several new directives that have progressively been taking place and making some difference. And we recognise that. Well, from the Taliban we haven't seen that kind of reduction of the casualties caused by their own devices.

1,462 victims, which means 1,462 families, civilian families, speak for themselves.

Georgette Gagnon: Just a point on the Taliban response. At the end of the report you'll see that the Taliban issued a statement in response to our press release on the May deaths, and it was quite interesting, and then we also issued a report to them. You may also note that yesterday an indication of the casualties that they allege were caused by ISAF was on one of

their websites. So we view this as the start of a good dialogue, but as the SRSG said they need to do more than words but show some action on that front.

Regarding the helicopters, the increase has been in the east and south-east in particular.

Staffan de Mistura: One on this side and then we move over to this side. The gentleman there now – we are equal –we are just trying to diversify a little.

Ariana TV translated from Dari]: From Ariana TV, the question is focused on the number of casualties that you just reported on. The countries who are Member States of the UN and abide by the United Nations Charter, if there is any intervention from any other country they should be under the protection of the United Nations. But in the case of Afghanistan that has been through three decades of war, and there has been no decisive action by the UN and others to prevent such a situation in Afghanistan. For instance, each time there is a casualty there is only a figure which they announce, it's only a monitoring but nothing in particular, nothing in action. Why doesn't the UN take decisive action to pressure, to stop inflicting casualties on civilians? It's like when we go to a Ministry and we ask for something. They just say we're only a policymaker and have no executive power. Is it the same with the UN? It's only a policymaker and doesn't have any power to prevent such casualties from happening?

Staffan de Mistura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan: Can I just say, in the future if we can have questions not speeches. But I will definitely answer this long question.

I can understand your frustrations. The Afghans have the right to be frustrated. I was here 22 years ago. At the time it was a completely different environment but again they were the civilian Afghans who were suffering. And the Afghan people have been abandoned already twice after an international presence. At the same time in all fairness I don't believe this time the international community is keen at all to abandon Afghanistan. Just the contrary. There will be a change in the military presence, definitely. But on the humanitarian and development side we're expecting and all that I'm hearing is that this time the Afghan people will not be left alone.

Regarding that we only talk about this (civilian casualties) as the UN, I will react to that. I've been with the UN 41 years in 18 war zones, three times in Afghanistan. I lost many of my friends and colleagues. And I know also that we were here during the time of Najibullah, during the time of the Mujahideen, during the time of the Taliban, during the time of the current presence. We will not, unless the Afghan people ask us to do so, leave you alone.

Issuing a report like this, as I said, is not academic, otherwise people would not react to it, otherwise there would not be a feeling of pressure that comes thanks to you actually, thanks to the media and thanks to the opinion, public opinion. The 76 colleagues who're working on human rights in Afghanistan do much more than just writing a report.

Thank you. I will jump to this side now and give the floor to a lady, then another one here. Please, the lady.

Wall Street Journal: I am a little confused about the discrepancy between ISAF claims of deaths which they say are on the way down and the UN claims which contradict this [inaudible].

Staffan de Mistura: The answer probably is very simple. We're talking about two different things. On the one side I'm not ignoring the fact that when you look at the statistics of previous

years and certainly since many [inaudible] there have been less attacks, less incidents seen from a military point of view. We are in the business of looking at civilian casualties and the number of civilian casualties has increased and no one is questioning that.

Good Morning Afghanistan [translated from Dari]: My question is about the use of the new type of the pressure-plate IEDs. What are your findings about where are these mines coming from? And secondly, you mentioned about the civilian casualties because of helicopters - what are you doing to stop these type casualties?

Staffan de Mistura: On the first one, actually I went through myself, in fact, when I came here for the first time 22 years ago a training in de-mining. So I have a de-mining competency, if you could put it like this. These devices first of all are produced in many parts of the world and secondly they can also be hand-made, in other words locally produced. Unfortunately they are relatively simple. They are not sophisticated and there are no infra-red issues here, there is no electronic device, just pressure. That is why they are so terrible, because they are simple to be produced, easy to be found in terms of material and totally indiscriminate. The first one who puts feet on it, it explodes. It is not at all targeted in a military fashion, it is really indiscriminate. On how this report and what we try to do constantly on air strikes I will leave the floor to Georgette.

Georgette Gagnon: In the report we have some recommendations for the ISAF on how to better target these bombs coming from these helicopters. We do have a number of concerns. For instance, some of these pilots are not trained appropriately on the tactical directives ISAF have on the use of force, we understand they recently took some action regarding this. All the pilots who fly these helicopters need to know about these. We are also concerned about the cultural awareness of some of the pilots who fly these, for example, when some people or some children are watering the gardens late at night or picking stones sometimes they are accused or seen as planting IEDs when they are not. So these are a couple of the recommendations we made.

Tolo TV [translated from Dari]: You said for the purpose of reduction in civilian casualties you have had contacts with the Taliban. With whom in the Taliban did you have these contacts? And why haven't you been able to convince them that their actions are against the principles of humanitarian laws, as we saw in such a report few months back.

Staffan de Mistura: I am not in a position of elaborating publically the type of contacts and the level of contacts. What you should perhaps take note of is that these contacts are linked to confidence building measures. And that this civilian casualty issue is the classic, the ultimately most important confidence building measure - not for us, not for anyone else but the Afghan people themselves.

Ghorbat TV [translated from Dari]: Given the high number of civilian casualties compared to same period last year, with transition ahead of us and security responsibility given to Afghans, do you think Afghanistan will have good days ahead of it?

Staffan de Mistura: Thank you, it is a very fine question. Well I am affected by a terrible disease which is called optimism. Otherwise I would have not been going through 18 wars and 41 years in this type of conflict. Therefore you have to forgive me, I will be slightly biased on that.

My hope is that this is temporary and it is during this critical crucial delicate period, which is period where you have a surge and spring offensive, that it will lead and has no option but to

lead to a political solution. Everyone has agreed, everybody feels that there is no military solution and what we are seeing is military activities and terrorism attacks [inaudible]. That cannot continue. But my concern is while we are waiting for this political solution, which is unavoidable, so many Afghan civilians will suffer again and that is why this report becomes more than a report, it becomes an appeal to everyone.

Thank you very much. *Tashakor.*

Strategic Communication and Spokespersons Unit, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)

Kabul, Afghanistan

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