

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

Press Statement

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SHIFTING TACTICS DRIVE RECORD HIGH AFGHAN CIVILIAN DEATH TOLL IN FIRST HALF OF 2011

LANDMINE-LIKE “PRESSURE PLATE IEDS” A DEADLY, DISTURBING TREND

14 JULY 2011, KABUL – Afghanistan experienced a 15 per cent increase in conflict-related civilian deaths in the first six months of 2011, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said today in releasing its 2011 Mid-year Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. The dramatic growth was mainly due to the use of landmine-like pressure plate improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by Anti-Government Elements (AGEs).

UNAMA documented 1,462 civilian deaths in the period, with 80 per cent attributed to Anti-Government Elements, an increase of 28 percent in civilian deaths linked to AGEs from the same period in 2010. A further 14 per cent of civilian deaths were attributed to Pro-Government Forces (PGF), down nine per cent from the same span in 2010, while six per cent of civilian deaths were not attributed to any party to the conflict.

With 368 civilian deaths, May 2011 was the deadliest month for Afghan civilians since UNAMA began systematically documenting civilian casualties in 2007. In June 2011, a further 360 civilian deaths were recorded - 308 or 86 per cent of civilian deaths were attributed to AGEs, 18 deaths (five per cent) were linked to PGF and 34 deaths (nine per cent) were not attributed.

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

“Afghan children, women and men continue to be killed and injured at an alarming rate,” said Staffan de Mistura, Special Representative for the Secretary General.

IEDs and suicide attacks, tactics used by AGEs, accounted for nearly half (49 per cent) of all civilian deaths and injuries in the first six months of 2011. Civilian deaths from IEDs increased 17 per cent over the same period in 2010, making IEDs, with 444 victims, the single largest killer of Afghan civilians in the first half of 2011 and causing 30 per cent of all civilian deaths.

Air strikes remained the leading cause of Afghan civilian deaths by Pro-Government Forces, with an increasing proportion resulting from attacks by helicopters. In the first six months of 2011, 79 Afghan civilians were killed by air strikes, a 14 per cent increase in civilian deaths from air strikes compared to the same period in 2010. Forty-four of the total 79 civilian deaths from

air strikes were from helicopter attacks (56 per cent). All aerial attacks in Afghanistan are carried out by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

Civilian deaths from ground combat and armed clashes in the first half of 2011 increased by 36 per cent compared to the same period in 2010 (304 total civilian deaths with 188 attributed to AGEs, 66 to PGF and 50 deaths from crossfire). Two per cent of all civilian casualties occurred as a result of night raids, down slightly from the first half of 2010. UNAMA documented 30 civilian deaths during night raid operations in the first six months of 2011.

With responsibility for security transitioning from international military forces to Afghan forces in several parts of Afghanistan in July violence rose in the first half of 2011 as AGEs sought to disrupt this process. Combined with the efforts of various armed groups to undermine peace and reconciliation and intensified fighting between the conflicting parties, Afghans experienced a decrease in protection.

A shift in the tactics of Anti-Government Elements increased the severity of AGEs' attacks on Afghan civilians, UNAMA's analysis found.

"In 2011, Anti-Government Elements expanded their use of unlawful means of warfare, particularly victim-activated pressure plate IEDs that act like anti-personnel landmines and cannot distinguish between a military target and a civilian," said Georgette Gagnon, Director of Human Rights for UNAMA. "This tactic violates Afghans' basic right to life and contravenes the international humanitarian law principles that all parties to the conflict are bound to uphold to minimize civilian loss of life and injury."

Two thirds of all IEDs used in Afghanistan, and the vast majority that kill civilians, are designed to be triggered by a weight of between 10-100 kilogrammes. This is the weight of a human, and in many instances that of a child, meaning that such IEDs function effectively as massive anti-personnel mines.

"Any civilian who steps on or drives over these IEDs has no defense against them and little chance of survival," said Gagnon. "Any use by Taliban members of these pressure-plate IEDs violates the 1998 Taliban ban on any type of landmines. UNAMA calls on the Taliban to publicly reiterate a ban on these."

Targeted killings of Afghan civilians by AGEs continued at last year's high rate. Between January and June 2011, UNAMA documented 191 targeted killings compared to 181 in the same period in 2010. UNAMA called on AGEs to use the meaning of "civilian" that is consistent and in compliance with their obligations under international humanitarian law. Under international humanitarian law "civilians" are all persons who are not combatants (members of military or paramilitary forces) or members of organized armed groups of a party to the armed conflict. Parties to a conflict are required to always make a distinction in the conduct of military operations between combatants and civilians and must not attack civilians meaning persons who are not or no longer taking part in hostilities.

"All civilian deaths and injuries, no matter what party is responsible, have tragic and lasting impacts on families and communities," said de Mistura. "Civilians will only 'win' in Afghanistan when civilian casualties decrease across the board."

UNAMA urged parties to the conflict to do much more to respect civilians, strengthen civilian protection and fully comply with their legal obligations to reduce civilian casualties and harm to civilian communities.

Selected Accounts from Afghan Civilians:

"It was in the morning and I was at home when it happened. My daughter and my two nieces were going to the madrassa to learn the basics of Islam from a religious scholar. When they left in the morning, I saw they had the Holy Qur'an in their hands. Those were really happy girls, they were saying to me all the time that they will become doctors to serve our people, especially their parents. After the IED explosion, I found my beloved daughter and nieces were wounded. We took them to the hospital but the injuries of one of my nieces were too serious and she passed away. The other two were asking me about her. I was telling them that she is fine and that she is at home, but the fact is that she is no more with them, that they would not play or go to school together anymore. These children were not a part of the conflict, they had very hopeful aspirations for their future, but this useless war took their future dreams and lives."

Tribal elder and father from Khost province describing to UNAMA the death and injuries of his daughter and two nieces ages 10, 10 and 12 years from an improvised explosive device on 15 March 2011.

"The Taliban come to any house they please, by force. Then they fire from the house and then ISAF and ANA (Afghan National Army) 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."

UNAMA's interview with a community leader from Marja district, Helmand province June 2011.

UNAMA's 2011 Mid-Year Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict makes the following recommendations to the parties to the conflict:

Anti-Government Elements:

- Prevent civilian casualties by complying with international humanitarian law including respect for the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautionary measures.
- Use the meaning of 'civilian' that is consistent and in compliance with international humanitarian law. Immediately cease targeting civilians who are protected against any attacks under international law, and withdraw orders that permit attacks and killings of civilians.
- Cease attacks on hospitals.
- Cease using pressure-plate IEDs, prohibit members from using them, and publicly commit to banning the use of these indiscriminate and therefore illegal weapons. Publicly restate the 1998 Taliban ban on landmines and reinforce the ban with all members.
- Implement and enforce codes of conduct and directives that instruct members to prevent civilian casualties and hold accountable those members who kill and injure civilians.
- Engage in a dialogue and information sharing on civilian casualties with UNAMA.

Government of Afghanistan:

- Establish a professional standing government body with powers to investigate, respond and report on incidents of civilian casualties.
- Create a civilian casualty tracking group similar to the ISAF Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell to ensure accurate and timely tracking of all incidents of civilian casualties caused by ANSF, to provide lessons learned, and to improve civilian protection, compensation, and accountability.
- Develop and implement with international military forces measures to protect civilians from being attacked and targeted.
- Ensure that all Afghan security forces (military and police) are properly trained in all elements of international humanitarian and human rights law and that such training is mandatory and integrated into all ANSF training programmes.
- Properly train and equip the Afghan National Police for crowd control including alternatives to lethal force. Ensure adequate training in the legal standards and implementation of such alternatives.

International Military Forces:

- Take all feasible precautions to prevent and minimize incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects during the planning and implementation of military operations. Fully and promptly implement new directives.
- Ensure all helicopter crews are trained on the Tactical Directives for the use of force and ensure implementation of Tactical Directives for all helicopter close combat attack missions. Investigate reasons why civilian casualties from helicopters are rising and implement changes to improve civilian protection.
- Review the “Night Raids Tactical Directive” of 7 December 2010 to ensure all elements of the directive are constantly mandatory for every raid and not optional. Ensure any new night raids directive is more restrictive due to continued civilian casualties and that all night raids are led by ANSF.
- Ensure all troops are adequately trained in escalation of force procedures including on the standard operating procedures on escalation of force. Equip checkpoints and quick reaction forces with alternatives to lethal force. Implement public service announcements, on radio in particular, to increase awareness by Afghan civilians of proper checkpoint and convoy procedures.

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