

UNAMA

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Strategic Communication and Spokespersons Unit, Kabul, Afghanistan

Press Conference

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PRESS CONFERENCE (near verbatim transcript)

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

Georgette Gagnon, Director of UNAMA's Human Rights Unit

Kabul – 10 August 2010

Staffan de Mistura: The reason why we are meeting is, in our opinion, an important one. It is the occasion for launching the six-months regular report that UNAMA is doing on the human rights side on civilian casualties. You know very well that this is a delicate issue and it is a delicate timing for doing so. This is a routine thing we do. It's nothing exceptional but the timing and analysis done is relevant.

I have got here with me, and probably you already know her and you shall know her better in the future, Georgette Gagnon, who is the Director of our Human Rights Unit here at UNAMA and has been, with her own team of 70 staff members, working hard on this report and on future reports.

This is the human rights report on civilian casualties for the last six months. You will all be getting it, you will all have a copy of the report in addition to a press release. It is a report which has quite a lot of research. It has been comparing notes with stakeholders so that we don't have major conflicting figures. It has been taking into account, of course, previous reports including the one of the Human Rights Commission. But in our opinion this report has the largest factual analysis so far done during the last six months on civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

You are going to have access to the report, so you will see many more figures than the ones that I and Georgette will be quoting, so please be reassured that you can go through that carefully. Meanwhile, I will take the liberty of giving you an overall picture and then, of course, Georgette will give you a more detailed one and then we are available for questions.

So, first consideration, which is a general one, and I have been carefully thinking about saying so, but it is the fact: the human cost of this conflict is unfortunately rising. The civilian casualties are increasing substantially. The report is focussing on Afghan civilians, you must know that. Georgette will be elaborating on the methodology. We are

talking about Afghan civilians, without forgetting many non-Afghan civilians, for instance the last terrible killing of eight civilian doctors, internationals, plus two Afghan supporting team, very recently. We are not covering that because the period [of reporting] does not cover it.

We said that the human cost of civilian Afghans is unfortunately rising substantially. Can we qualify that? Yes we can. Afghan civilian casualties have increased by 31 per cent over the same period last year, 2009. Thirty-one per cent more than last year, Afghan civilian casualties. By casualties we include the people who have been killed and people who have been wounded, and I will go more into details.

You will notice that this figure is higher than previous reports coming from other sources. We believe that this is the reason of our own methodology, and I must say, frankly, with a very accurate analysis done also by having access, both on the ground and to various stakeholders, to information that perhaps others don't have.

Thirty-one per cent means what in real terms, in human being terms? Three thousand two hundred and sixty-eight civilians during the last six months, Afghan civilians, have been casualties of this conflict. Of them, 1,271 died and 1,997 were injured, most of them severely.

Of this total number, 2,477 civilian Afghan casualties were caused by the AGEs, the anti-government elements, which include the Taliban, and 386 by the pro-government forces [PGF], which includes ISAF. Ten per cent of the incidents were not possible to ascertain and attribute, so that's why the figures are not completely, totally summing up. You had to add ten per cent which could not be attributed.

The anti government elements were responsible therefore for 76 per cent of all Afghan casualties – 76 per cent of all Afghans casualties were caused by anti-government elements, unfortunately. This is up from the 53 per cent which was last year's same period. The pro-government forces were clearly responsible for 12 per cent of all casualties. Airstrikes were and still are the highest cause of the pro-government forces casualties. According to our own estimates, 69 civilians were killed and 45 were injured. However, since we are objective and we are fair, we also have to acknowledge when any of the sides is actually making an effort. It's never enough. One single victim is always a cause of concern but when they make an effort...and in this case we have noticed a 64 per cent, I repeat a 64 per cent, reduction of casualties by airstrikes when compared to the previous period last year.

We believe this is the outcome and the beginning of the results of both General McChrystal's and now General Petraeus's guidelines to limit to the minimum possible and controlling to the maximum the effects of air raids.

But as you will see in the recommendations and the report we are continuing to press for very stringent attention in order to limit these type of casualties as much as possible to zero.

Night raids have been causing 41 deaths according to our own records, which is basically 18 per cent of pro-government forces-caused casualties.

Let's look at some different casualty analysis, which can give us an idea about the current trend, which is worrisome. For example, assassinations – targeted assassinations – have been going up by 95 per cent when you compare it to last year, including three candidates for the future elections. The IEDs [improvised explosive devices], which are the explosive devices which are put on the roads - 100 per cent by the anti-government elements - have killed 557 Afghan civilians and wounded 1,137 people. These are the roadside bombs placed like the one which killed recently, unfortunately, killed 20 civilians and wounded more than 50 in a bus, as you remember.

Another trend that is particularly worrying is that children casualties have gone up by 55 per cent since the same period of last year, 55 per cent. And women casualties have gone up six per cent since the same period of last year. Conclusion, we are worried. We are concerned. We very concerned about the future, because the human cost of the conflict is unfortunately being paid too heavily by civilian Afghans. And that's why this report is a wake-up call.

We have seen that 76 per cent of the casualties are attributed and claimed by the AGEs, by the anti-government elements in Afghanistan, including the Taliban. That alone justifies for us to make a special appeal and request to them, to realize that if they want to be a part of a future Afghanistan, they cannot do so over the bodies of so many Afghan civilians.

We are, at the same time, making a request to ISAF and NATO to increase substantially their care in avoiding civilian casualties, because we believe that everyone has come to this country to protect civilians and that should be the ultimate goal of everyone in this country.

Tashakor, thank you. With your permission I will now give the floor to Georgette. And I will of course be open to questions.

Georgette Gagnon: Let me review some top line findings with you. I will try not to repeat, of course, what the SRSG [Special Representative for the Secretary-General] said and just provide some more detail. Just on women and children casualties, as noted women casualties increased by 6 per cent from the same period in 2009: 120 women were killed and 151 were injured.

Child casualties leapt by 55 per cent: 176 children were killed and 389 injured.

IEDs and suicide attacks killed 39 women and 74 children. This is a 44 per cent increase in female deaths and 155 per cent increase in child deaths from these two tactics, IEDs and suicide attacks.

The pro-government forces, according to our statistics, caused 42 female civilian deaths and 25 injuries. This is a decrease of 42 per cent. PGFs, or pro-government forces, caused 51 child deaths and 26 injuries, which is a decrease of 50 per cent.

As noted already, IEDs and suicide attacks caused the most civilian casualties and deaths overall and we have given you these figures. I also wanted to mention the escalation of force incidents by pro-government forces where civilians are shot or injured at a check points. These escalation of force incidents caused the deaths of 36 people and 36 injuries. In terms of assassinations and executions, as noted, they have dramatically increased by more than 95 per cent. Most of these are in the south and southeast and these are assassinations of civilians, targeted assassinations of civilians, from all walks of life.

The assassinations and executions increased from an average of 3.6 per week and 15.6 per month in the first part of 2009, to on average from May and June alone of 18 per week.

Thanks very much.

Questions and Answers:

IRNA: Please tell us if these figures and this report in general are a country wide report or if it just covers in-conflict provinces?

Staffan de Mistura: The answer is that it is a country-wide report.

BBC: You describe this as a wake up call, this is not, as you said yourself, the first report of its kind. There have been these kinds of reports warning that civilian casualties continue to rise. What can you say or do that will stem the rise?

Staffan de Mistura: It is a wake up call for us, certainly, because by looking at these figures we suddenly have in front of us a number and a tendency and a trend of increase which we have a duty to raise publicly to the attention of everyone, in particular for those who are causing those deaths. Secondly, because this is a critical period of a critical year, and in this context, if anyone is trying to reach some type of future of Afghanistan that we all are striving and hoping together with Afghans to reach, it can not be done over a mountain of civilian deaths.

I want to focus again for a moment, although the report is not doing it, we shall not forget also the international civilian deaths like the eight very courageous and dedicated doctors who were killed who have been working here for thirty years helping the Afghans. They are part, in our mind, of all the civilians who are paying too much of a heavy price during this very crucial, critical period of the conflict.

Pajwok News Agency [translated from Dari]: A question with two parts. The first part has to do with the increase in civilian casualties. What is the reason for increased

civilian casualties? And the second part, what is UNAMA's views on the latest statement of President Karzai on the closure of private security companies?

Staffan de Mistura: Regarding the first part, the reasons, well we should be asking those to whom we are addressing this report and you will see in the report that there are the three stakeholders who are all being requested by the report to make a particular effort. What we do know there is no justification for having civilians, and so many civilians increasingly so, paying a price for what we hope will finally be a political solution.

Regarding the issue about security companies and others, I believe like everyone that there is a need for regulation, and there is a need for a strict regulation on this. Afghanistan is a sovereign, independent country and has the right of establishing, like every country, its own regulations, particularly on the issue such as security companies.

Tamadon TV [translated from Dari]: First, given the classified documents leak recently, civilian casualties were considered a problem. And the United Nations did not show any reaction on that. And the second part is normally the civilian casualties, when the attacks are taking place it is targeting the military forces. Since the military forces are settled within the civilian areas and that causes the civilian casualties, why are the military forces not leaving civilian areas in order to avoid civilian casualties?

Staffan de Mistura: Regarding the first point, we do not react to leaks although they can be sometimes extremely helpful. We do not react to leaks. Our job is actually to look very carefully at facts, and based on that produce a report that we believe is authoritative enough to be quotable and used for this type of press conference but also for making sure that no one should believe that these types of casualties are kept under the table.

Regarding the second point, that is exactly why we are making this report available and quite strongly available, to make sure that anyone who is planning to be part of this conflict and is currently part of this conflict should not be using human shields, should not be fighting from where civilians are and are likely to be hid. And as part of the recommendations and, frankly, part of the human rights general recommendations in conflict areas.

Associated Press: One thing to clarify, the pro-Government forces' casualties fell? I am sorry I did not hear what the figure was last year. And then also, the question I wanted to ask was, you talk about how insurgents want to be part of the future of Afghanistan and they cannot do so on the back of so many civilian casualties. What does that mean for potential political talks? Does that mean that the UN, given these figures, will not back a negotiated peace with the Taliban or is less likely to?

Staffan de Mistura: On the first point there regarding the difference between last year and this year on the 12 per cent...

Georgette Gagnon: Any figure for 2009, what the actual figure was is found in the report. If you are looking for the exact comparison with 2009, that is in the report.

Staffan de Mistura: You will see it in the report. There are so many figures that you can extrapolate. Regarding the second point, let me say the following: we all are aware, and I don't think anyone in this country and outside this country don't believe it, that there is no military solution to this conflict. Second point is that, therefore, the only way out is a political solution which can come only through a dialogue and therefore a discussion. The UN will always be in favour and will be available to facilitate any political solution which, of course, needs to be Afghan-led, not imposed by anyone of us. That is why, when we send this message, it is to tell everyone, in particular the AGEs and the Taliban, one day when unavoidably there will be a discussion about the future of this country, will you want to come to that table with thousands of Afghans, civilians, killed along the road? Or else will you hear our message on behalf of all Afghans? We cannot imagine that that road will have that type of increase like we have had during the last six months.

Georgette Gagnon: Let me clarify and it was pro-government forces, 386 civilian casualties which is 12 per cent of the total civilian casualties that is down 30 per cent from the first six months 2009.

Wakht News Agency [translated from Dari]: You mentioned, in order to avoid civilian casualties, you proposed negotiation and dialogue with the opposition. What do you want to say for the military, international military forces, as they are also causing civilian deaths by using aerial attacks and whatsoever?

Staffan de Mistura: That is exactly what the report is saying. If you read carefully the report, you will see how we are also focusing very much on the aerial attacks, on the night raids and on the excessive use of force. So we are addressing that part.

Al Jazeera: There are parts of the new directive of General Petraeus that are classified. How concerned are you that these portions might be a decreasing trend in civilian casualties? [sic]

Staffan de Mistura: You seem to be more informed than I am. I did not know that there was a part classified. I have seen those that are not classified. What I can tell you is that the report is actually indicating a lot of recommendations which are addressed to ISAF, and they are in fact in my opinion taking care of whatever non-classified issues related to civilian casualties by asking particular attention, particular types of investigation and particular types of transparency. As you can see in the recommendations. On the other hand, we have to be fair and we are going to be fair whenever it is even uncomfortable. That is the role the United Nations has to have vis-à-vis the Afghans. We did notice a decrease in civilian casualties as a result of both [General] McChrystal's and General Petraeus's guidelines. It does not mean that this is perfect. Far from that. It does not mean that we will not continue pressing and requesting. But we are witnessing that.

While we are witnessing instead a major increase on the side of AGE, and that is why, in all fairness, we have to draw the attention to that.

El Mundo: I have two questions. Have you analysed the reasons for the number of assassinations that have increased in May and June, to 18 assassinations per week? Do you know? My other question, is the UN going to give support for a blanket amnesty for the Taliban? And if not, you are not going to be supporting a blanket amnesty for the human rights violations of members of the Government and Parliament?

Staffan de Mistura: Regarding the first point. As you can imagine, one can speculate throughout the day and go into a scientific analysis. But the speculation I would venture to make is that the spike of targeted assassinations and the locations and the type of people who are being actually assassinated from all walks in life seems to be linked to the attempt to intimidate any type of Government or pro-government official or community to not cooperate with the Government or with the international community. And that seems to be particularly prevalent in some parts of the south where the expectation of a surge is taking place.

Regarding the second question. First of all, this will be up to the Afghans. We are only guests here. Their future and their present will be decided by them and the Afghan authorities and the Afghan communities. They are a very proud people, they have always managed, at certain point of their lives, to manage their own future. So I will not comment on that. We will certainly be available to assist. We'll cross the bridge when we get there. Meanwhile, we still have to end this conflict and reach a negotiated political formula.

Salam Watandar [translated and summarised from Dari]: There has been a number of incidents such as recently in Helmand, Nangarhar and Baghlan, where international forces have caused many civilian casualties and in some cases in order to keep their own security they have shot people to death on the roads. Your action has been only to condemn these kind of incidents and to warn them not to repeat the incidents. What does the United Nations do with regard to the arrest and trial of these people?

Staffan de Mistura: First of all, please read the report, because the report is quite detailed. As I told you it is not a small report, look how many copies and how many pages. The report is actually coming with a lot of analysis on exactly those cases you are making. Secondly, you will also notice one thing that what we are doing is making substantial recommendations for the future, and when you will see these three categories you will also see an answer to your questions.

Thank you very much. Thank you.

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