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

Transcript

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PRESS CONFERENCE (near verbatim transcript)

Nicholas Haysom, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan.

James Rodehaver, Acting Director, UNAMA Human Rights Unit.

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Thank you for attending, it is important that media shows interest in this topic.

This afternoon, we will be releasing UNAMA's Mid-Year Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in 2012. This is the seventh such report that UNAMA has issued on this important topic since it began monitoring civilian casualties in 2007.

UNAMA's work on civilian protection focuses on the situation of ordinary Afghan women, children and men struggling to go about their daily lives despite years of conflict. The 3,099 civilians who were killed or injured in the last six months are just such ordinary Afghan citizens.

Civilian deaths and injuries reduced by 15 per cent in the first six months of 2012. Despite a reduction in civilian casualties overall, Conflict in Afghanistan continued to inflict a disproportionate and unacceptable toll on Afghan women, children and men.

The reduction in civilian casualties is welcome but these gains are fragile. They do not reflect a move towards a peaceful society. On the contrary, the figures we are releasing today reflect an armed conflict that is exacting a toll on civilian lives similar in severity to the levels in 2009 and 2010. As we have repeatedly said, one civilian casualty is one too many.

The decrease in civilian deaths and injuries is a result of many factors. This report does not suggest that Afghans are necessarily safer or better protected in their communities nor does it reflect any attempt by Anti-Government Elements to minimize civilian casualties.

Indeed the vast majority of civilian casualties drives from Anti-Government Elements' use of indiscriminate tactics such as pressure-plate IEDs, suicide attacks and as targeted killings of civilians including persons accused of supporting the Government or international military forces as well as Government officials and workers, private contractors, community and tribal elders and men and women who have actively pursued peace and reconciliation.

In the last month alone, there have been five instances of attacks targeting imams in mosques, all during Ramadan. This is indicative of the alarming trend in targeted killings of civilians.

This report recognizes that Pro-Government Forces have taken measures that have proven to be effective in reducing civilian casualties. Civilian deaths and injuries caused by air strikes, night raids, and other military operations have reduced significantly. Despite these reductions, the use of airstrikes continues to cause more civilian casualties, particularly women and children, than any other tactic used by international military forces.

I will now hand over to James Rodehaver, UNAMA's acting head of Human Rights, to go through the findings of the report in more details.

James Rodehaver: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. It is my distinct pleasure to be here today with you to discuss the key findings in our latest report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.

Between 1 January and 30 June 2012, conflict related violence resulted in 3,099 civilian casualties, including 1,145 civilians killed and 1,954 wounded, that is a 15 per cent overall decrease in civilian casualties compared with the same period in 2011.

30 per cent (or 925 of the 3099) of all civilians killed or wounded in first half of 2011 were women and children.

Anti-Government elements were responsible for 80 per cent of all civilian casualties, killing 882 civilians and injuring 1,593 in the first six months of 2012, that is a reduction of 15 per cent when compared with the first half of 2011.

Operations by Pro-Government Forces resulted in 165 civilian deaths and 131 civilians injured, which a drop of 25 per cent when compared with the first six months of 2011.

Pro-government forces were responsible for 10 per cent of the casualties overall. There were also 10 per cent of the civilian casualties which were unable to attribute to any party to the conflict.

In terms of the individual findings on Anti-Government elements, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) remained the biggest threat to Afghan children, women and men in 2012, causing 33 per cent of all civilian casualties or 327 civilian deaths and 689 civilians injured. If you include attacks involving the use of IEDs, including suicide and complex attacks that percentage jumps to 53 per cent of all civilian deaths and injuries in Afghanistan in the first half of 2012 were caused by IEDs.

Perhaps most alarmingly, civilian casualties resulting from targeted killings by Anti-Government Elements increased by 53 per cent in the first six months of 2012, which is 255 civilian deaths and 101 injuries in 237 separate incidents.

During the month of July, including the Ramadan period – which is not covered by the Report, civilian casualties as a result of target killings have continued to rise at an alarming rate, 240 per cent if you compare this five weeks period with the same five weeks period of 2011 and this has included use of IEDs as a weapon of assassination which has been used in mosques, which are of course sites protected under International humanitarian law (IHL).

Regarding the tactics of Pro-Government forces, aerial operations by international military forces remained the tactic responsible for more civilian deaths and injuries than any other tactic used by Pro-Government Forces. Between 1 January and 30 June, UNAMA documented 83 civilian deaths and 46 injured as a result of aerial attacks by international military forces, down 23 per cent from same period of 2011.

It is important to note that nearly 2/3 of these civilian casualties caused by aerial attacks were women and children.

We do know that however in June, ISAF issued new standard operating procedures and tactical directives to try and reduce further the number of civilian casualties caused by aerial operation.

Civilian casualties during night search operations by Pro-Government Forces had also considerably dropped, precisely by 27 per cent compared to Jan-June 2011. Civilian casualties by other combat engagements involving PGF likewise declined in the first six months of 2012.

A new feature – UNAMA conducted extensive consultations with local communities in 99 districts throughout Afghanistan where Anti-Government Elements have increasingly exerted influence or control to get their perceptions of civilian protection by AGEs.

In our interviews we received consistent accounts of Anti-Government Elements carrying out human rights abuses with impunity, including running of parallel judicial mechanisms that resulted in executions, amputations, and severe beatings.

We also received account of the Taliban's involvement in education system is increasing and could impact access of children, especially girls, to education.

Similarly, AGE's are interfering in the delivery of health care, which has disrupted the ability of doctors and clinics to provide essential health services, including polio vaccinations;

In the first six month of 2012, UNAMA verified 34 incidents of attacks against schools, their staff and students including burning of schools, targeted killings and intimidation of teachers, armed attacks and occupation of schools, and closures, particularly of girls' schools. This is a 240 per cent increase over such incidents compared with same period a year ago.

Lastly, in terms of our monitoring of the Afghan Local Police (ALP), throughout 2012, several communities reported improvement in the security environment in many areas where there was an ALP presence;

UNAMA continued, however, to receive complaints from these communities of problems with ALP. These complaints included problems with recruitment and vetting processes, concerns that the ALP had been infiltrated by the AGEs, weaknesses in Afghan National Police command and control over the ALP, weak and ad hoc oversight, and lack of accountability for past and ongoing human rights abuses, which contributes to impunity.

As with all of our reports, and I will finish by reviewing this, we include targeted recommendations to all parties to the conflict to advise on how best civilian protection can be increased.

Of course we consider all of our recommendations to be extremely important, but to give you a break; I will go just over through a few key ones.

To Anti-Government Elements:

In accordance with international law, stop targeting civilians, civilian locations, such as schools, and protected locations, such as mosques.

They should also stop use of pressure-plate IEDs; as they have committed in their public statements in the past.

To Government of Afghanistan:

Take further concrete steps to strengthen the reach and effectiveness of civilian rule of law institutions, and to ensure investigation, prosecution and punishment of individuals who commit human rights abuses.

And in line with this call for accountability, they should also ensure that there are effective vetting, recruitment, oversight and accountability mechanisms for ALP.

To International Military Forces:

We ask them to continue to review tactical directives and standard operational procedures, particularly those regulating aerial operations;

Also as an essential aspect of transition, we call on international military forces to ensure that ANSF are sufficiently resourced, trained and equipped to command, control and effectively conduct counter-IED operations, including IED-disposal and elimination of IED networks.

Thank you.

DSRSG Nicholas Haysom: If I can may two closing remarks prior to opening the floor for questions.

Any initiative that intends to contribute to peace it must place it highest priority on protection of civilians. In our view for the Afghan people, the value and credibility of any negotiated process, or peace initiative will be measured by its contribution to reduced civilian casualties and sustainable improvements in security.

Finally, it is important to remember that we are gathered here today during the holy month of Ramadan, a period when it is right and proper to reflect on the sanctity of human life. We all need to work for the peace and welfare of all Afghans, but that work must extend throughout the year. And finally I call on all parties to the conflict to increase their efforts to protect civilians from harm and to respect the sanctity of human life.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

TOLO TV [*translated from Dari*]: We have many reports of such kind in the past and this is your seventh report that has been released by UNAMA. But although pro-government

elements tried to protect civilians, Anti-Government elements (AGE) did not care about the reduction of civilian casualties. At some points they rejected such reports. In your opinion if such people do not care about this and continue to violate international humanitarian laws to reduce civilian casualties, do you think peace talks we should make with them? And will UNAMA continue to only launch reports or it will take some practical actions too?

DSRSG HAYSOM: They may well benefit from peace talks regardless the discussion on civilian casualties. But we think that there is a need for there to be an ongoing dialogue on civilian casualties with all the parties. We realize that a report can be an important part and basis for that dialogue and it has proved so in the past with all the parties. And we do recognize that we have got to go behind naming and blaming and constructively engage with the parties pointing out to them very specifically the measures which they are required to take. It is at least one indication of effectiveness of the report is that almost all the parties seek to engage with us including the AGE to try and demonstrate and contest the information, put new information before us or attempt to demonstrate that they in fact are taking and responding to the criticism in the report.

JAMES RODEHAVER: I would just stress one of the points that we have said at the very beginning today when we started which is that we are here for the Afghan people, for ordinary men, women and children. There must be accountability and that is why we monitor human rights abuses, and why we report on it. People should not lose their lives with no one paying attention and no one trying to hold those responsible to account.

THE GUARDIAN: I just wanted you to give us some figures from July would you go through those complete figures for July civilian casualties not just for targeted killings because it's been quite a violent month. Would you go through those figures for May and June because again they were much more violent, the fall in civilian casualties at the start of the year was much bigger than the fall over the whole six months? And finally, there has been a fall in civilian casualties but there has also been quite a good increase in people fleeing conflict-related violence. Do you see any connection between those two, people leaving areas where they have been to face other kinds of difficulties in Kabul or other places. Thank you.

JAMES RODEHAVER: Thank you. The figures for July have not been released yet. They're not finalized but the preliminary statistics do show that there was a 5 per cent increase in civilian casualties in July and I think that is one of the reasons why we would caution reading too much into the 15 per cent overall reduction in civilian casualties. That is a very hollow trend. The trend if you remember back in May, we released a statement noting that civilian casualties were down by 23 per cent at that time. By the end of June, that was 15 per cent. We still haven't done the calculations but of course with July being deadlier this year than last July which was a very heavy month in the fighting last year that overall reduction we expect to go down even further. So, but again those figures are not yet final so I won't get into the weeds and try and explain or go into civilian deaths and injuries at that point.

I would also just stress again these figures that we quoted earlier on the increase of civilian casualties as a result of targeted killings, those figures have raised alarmingly in the last five weeks and again the use of IEDs as a means to perform targeted killings has met many more deaths and many more injuries. In the report we do note a co-relation between the fighting and the displacement of civilians. We have a specific section in the report that notes that there have

been over 150,000 individuals displaced by the conflict over the first six months of 2012 and we get our figures from a variety of sources including UNHCR on that.

HASHT-E-SUBH [Translated from Dari]: You previously mentioned that any efforts being made with regards to peace and reconciliations, protection of civilian must be on the top of the agenda. I would like to know if you have felt that the government has ever put it on the top of their agenda.

DSRSG HAYSOM: We can only encourage them to do so. What has been on the agenda on such talks I would not be able to comment on.

Tamadon TV [Translated from Dari]: Given the fact that 2014 is approaching, people are worried of similar situations in the past three decades and people may face a kind of crisis which may lead to increase in the civilian deaths, has UNAMA paid any attention to this?

DRSG HAYSOM: Quite frankly we place great importance on open inclusive dialogue in Afghanistan between all of those in conflict and would want to see an inter-Afghan accommodation or arrangements under which all Afghans can live peacefully together. We would do whatever we can to promote that dialogue but we would have of course acknowledged that it's an inter-Afghan dialogue and it is not a dialogue that we in the UN can hold on behalf of anybody else. We have indicated our intention to give every support to any dialogue per say that would make a constructive contribution.

JAMES RODEHAVER: I would just add in line with that, in terms of an inclusive peace process we have been very active in encouraging the engagement of the wider range of Afghan society as possible in any future peace process and in any consultations regarding reintegration and reconciliation. As a result of that we sponsored last year an initiative called the Afghan People's Dialogue on peace which was conducted by 13 Afghan civil society organizations conducting over 78 consultations with ordinary Afghan men and women, throughout the country, over 1500 people were interviewed to get their views on peace and give them a feeling that their voice mattered. So that we can be on the top of issues and grievances locally and know how to use best our own efforts and our own political and moral authority.

AL-JAZEERA: I am wondering whether the reported (inaudible) interviews around the country whether you get the sense of whether the Government is in control of more territory or less territory than it was last year.

JAMES RODEHAVER: I would honestly say that we are not in a position to make any conclusions in that regard since this is really the first time that we have undertaken such an extensive process to consult people specifically on this topic, so for us, it's very difficult to make that judgment.

TURKISH REPORTER: The report says ... that more than 40 people have been killed but the Afghan Interior Minister says 70 people were killed. My question is what do you think about this report and do you have independent sources to count these casualties or do you use Afghan government sources?

JAMES RODEHAVER: On this specific incident I can't confirm that the precise number that we documented, I would be trying to rely on memory but we did our own information gathering. We of course we always check our figures against government statistics, against ISAF statistics. We

take in all information but in the end we do our own monitoring and our own verification of our data which is a rigorous process which involves us speaking to a variety of people on the ground and a variety of sources who witnessed individual incidents. And again that is a variety of people, from security actors to eye witnesses to village elders of course any others that saw or had to deal with the casualties such as medical personnel. We consult a wide range of data before we make our figures final. We also try to, wherever we see discrepancies, we try to work very hard and consult with different actors including ISAF and government where possible to find out why their statistics are different than ours because...

I would just also say that disputing our statistics is something that we are quite used to and so we frequently have to answer this type of question. In fact I almost wish it was an Olympic sport because we've gotten so good at it but I would just note that in the report itself we note that the Taliban have been publicly questioning our figures and back in February, when we released our last report they sent us a list of several incidents, over 30 incidents that they said we did not account for in our figures. And we went through every incident and found that in almost every single case we did account for those incidents and there were only two cases where they had brought us information that we did not include. We were aware of the incidents but we had been unable to confirm those figures but we responded to them and that response is at the end of the annex of the report that we are releasing today.

ASSOCIATED PRESS: *Inaudible.*

JAMES RODEHAVER: I don't have the specific statistics in front of me to be able to break it down for those specific months for you. But I would just note that May and June this year the number of casualties were lower in both cases but it's also important to remember that last year May and June were the two deadliest months of the year. July was also at a very comparable level so the fact that there was a decline in May of this year then a lower decline in June and now an increase this July is rather telling and shows the direction the conflict may be heading in terms of the impact on civilians.

NAZIFULLAH SALARZAI: You can also find the report in Dari and Pashto on our website. Thank you for coming.

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)

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