



United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

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ANNUAL REPORT (2008): PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN ARMED CONFLICT

KABUL AND GENEVA – 17 FEBRUARY 2009 – The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) today publishes its report on the situation of civilians in armed conflict in 2008. This report, compiled by UNAMA's Human Rights Unit draws on extensive, independent, and impartial monitoring and investigation of incidents involving the loss of life or injury to civilians in conflict zones. The analysis is geared to identifying trends as well as measures needed to pre-empt the loss of life and to enhance the protection of civilians in Afghanistan.

In 2008, UNAMA recorded a total of 2,118 civilian casualties. The growing death toll, which represents an increase of almost 40 percent on the 1,523 civilian deaths recorded in 2007, is of great concern to the United Nations. This disquieting pattern demands that the parties to the conflict take all necessary measures to avoid the killing of civilians.

The majority of civilian casualties – 872 (41 percent) – occurred in the south of the country, which saw heavy fighting in several provinces. High casualty figures have also been recorded in the south-east (20 percent), east (13 percent), central (13 percent) and western (9 percent) regions. Fifty-five percent (1,160) of the overall death toll was attributed to anti-government elements (AGEs) and 828 (39 percent) to Afghan security and international military forces (pro-government forces).

The armed opposition was responsible for 1,160 civilian deaths; this represents an increase of 65 percent over 2007 figures. The vast majority – 85 percent – of those killed by anti-government elements died as a result of suicide and improvised explosive devices.

2008 saw a distinct pattern of attacks by the armed opposition, in crowded residential and other such areas with apparent disregard for the extensive damage they cause to civilians. Insurgents have also persisted with an intimidation campaign that includes the summary execution of individuals perceived to be associated with, or supportive of, the Government and its allies. Victims include teachers; students; doctors and health workers; tribal elders; civilian government employees; former police and military personnel; and labourers involved in public-interest construction work. Schools, particularly those for girls, have come under increasing attack thereby depriving thousands of students, especially girls, of their right of access to education.

Air-strikes were responsible for the largest percentage – 64 percent – of civilian deaths attributed to pro-government forces in 2008. Night-time raids, which sometimes result in death and injury to civilians, are of continuing concern and are widely resented in many communities.

38 aid workers (almost all from non-governmental organisations) were killed in 2008. This is double the number for 2007. A further 147 were abducted. By the end of 2008, "humanitarian space" had shrunk considerably. Large parts of the south,

south-west, south-east, east, and central regions of Afghanistan are now classified as an “extreme risk, hostile environment” for humanitarian operations.

As the conflict intensifies, civilians bear the brunt of the fighting. In addition to the sharp increase in civilian deaths, vulnerable groups are also suffering in terms of destruction of vital infrastructure, loss of income and earning opportunities, and deterioration of access to essential services.

The United Nations remains deeply concerned at the high cost that the armed conflict is having on civilians. While pro-government forces have instituted a number of changes to tactical directives, more needs to be done to avoid the loss of innocent lives. Afghans are, rightly, calling for greater accountability as well as precautionary measures to safeguard the lives of civilians.

The United Nations calls on all parties to the conflict, the government of Afghanistan, and the international community to take action to ensure that obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law are observed and that the impact of the conflict on civilians is minimised.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- A full copy of the report in English can be found at www.unama-afg.org
- Pashto and Dari versions of the executive summary of the report can also be found at www.unama-afg.org
- Journalists should also refer to the Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan published on 16 February 2009. The Report can be found at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/10session/A.HRC.10.23.pdf>
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