

AFGHANISTAN

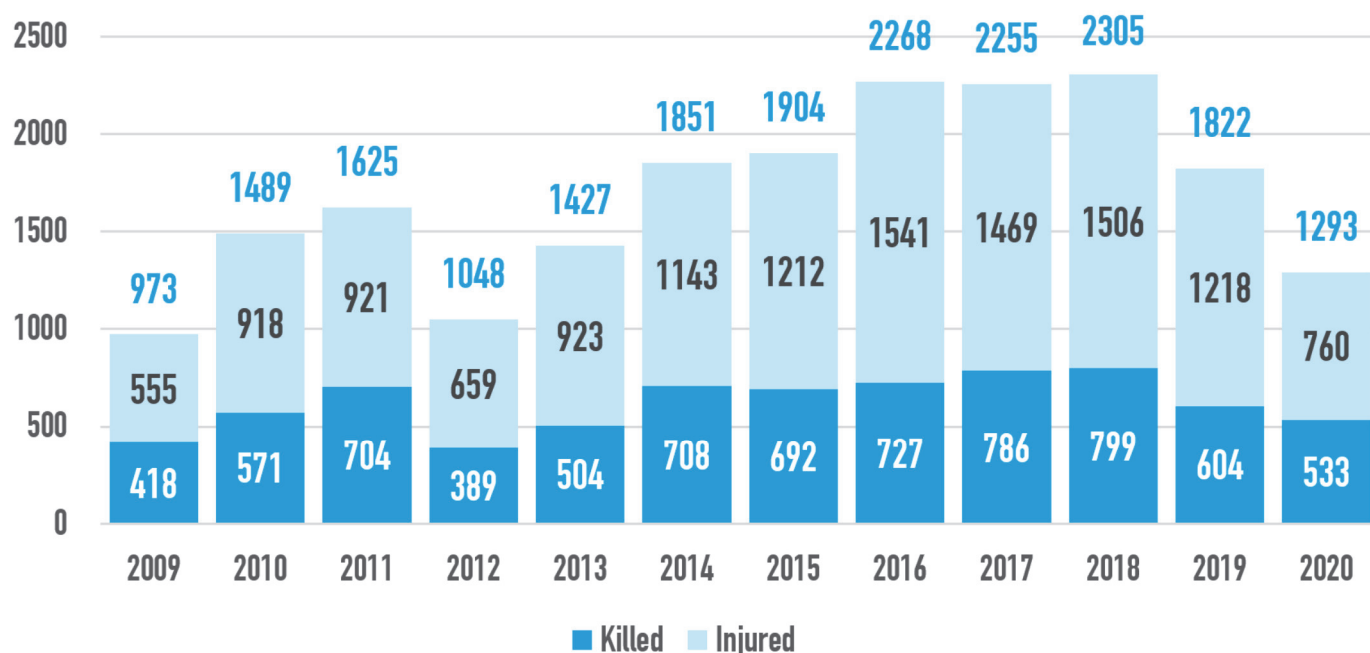
PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN ARMED CONFLICT FIRST QUARTER REPORT: 1 JANUARY – 31 MARCH 2020

From 1 January to 31 March 2020, UNAMA documented 1,293 civilian casualties (533 killed and 760 injured), highlighting that the conflict in Afghanistan continues to be one of the deadliest in the world for civilians, at a time when the potential impact of COVID-19 poses a threat to all individuals in Afghanistan. Of specific concern is the continued impact the conflict has on women and children, with UNAMA having documented 417 child casualties (152 killed and 265 injured) and 168 women casualties (60 killed and

108 injured). The overall number of civilian casualties in the first quarter, however, represents a 29 per cent decrease as compared to the first quarter of 2019 and is the lowest figure for a first quarter since 2012.

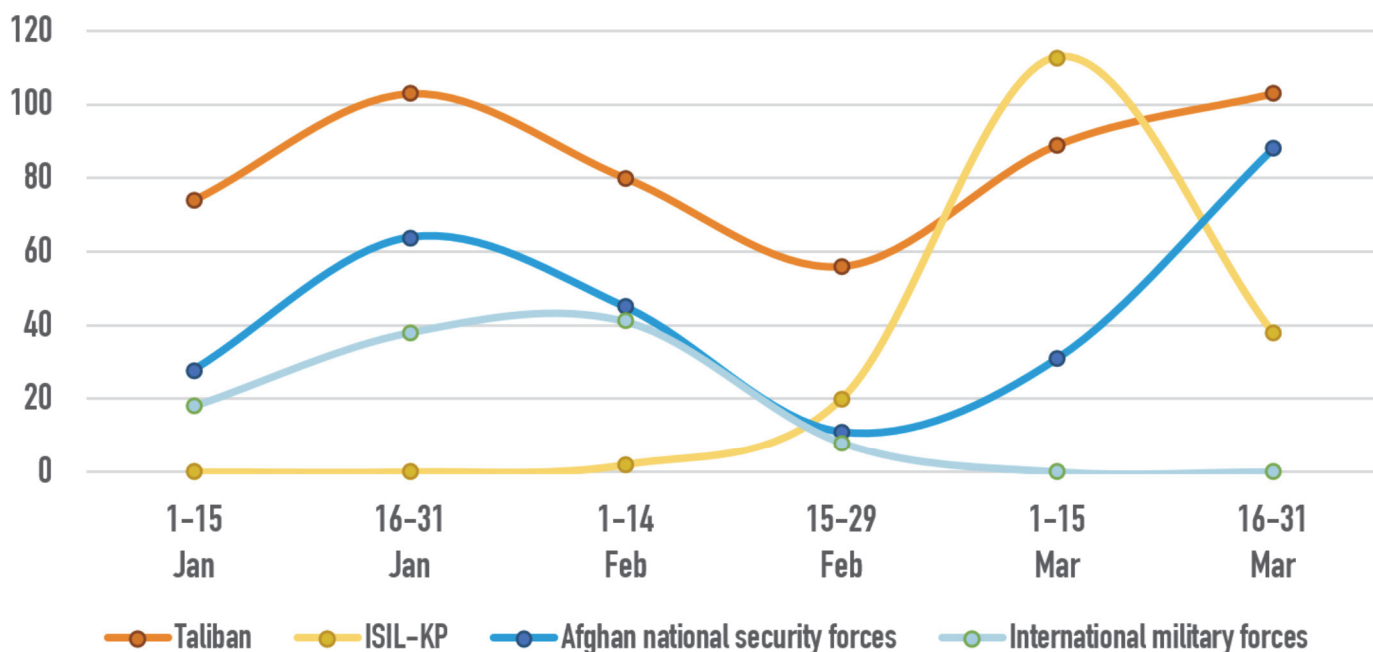
UNAMA reiterates that the best way to protect civilians from conflict and the impact of COVID-19 is to stop the fighting. It calls on all parties to the conflict in Afghanistan to immediately respond to the recent call by the UN Secretary-General for a

Total Civilian Casualties
1 January to 31 March 2009–2020



Civilian Casualty Timeline by Party to the Conflict

1 January to 31 March 2020



global ceasefire¹, so that the necessary focus and resources can be directed to provide the required humanitarian response to COVID-19. Bringing an end to the fighting would protect civilians from conflict-related harm and would allow healthcare and other humanitarian workers to carry out their activities safely and without undue restrictions, thereby providing preventive and protective measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNAMA is gravely concerned with the acceleration in violence observed in March and the consequent increase in the number of civilian casualties and harm caused.

Anti-Government Elements continued to be responsible for the majority of civilian casualties – 55 per cent - during the first quarter, causing 710 civilian casualties (282 killed and 428 injured). UNAMA attributed 39 per cent to Taliban, 13 per cent to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) and the remainder to undetermined Anti-Government Elements.

Pro-Government Forces were responsible for 32 per cent of all civilian casualties during the first quarter of 2020, causing 412 civilian casualties (198 killed and 214 injured). Of concern, Pro-Government Forces were responsible for more child casualties than Anti-Government Elements during the first three months of the year and over twice as many child deaths, mainly due to airstrikes and indirect fire during ground engagements. UNAMA attribut-

ed 21 per cent of overall civilian casualties to Afghan national security forces, eight per cent to international military forces and the remainder to pro-government armed groups and undetermined or multiple Pro-Government Forces.

UNAMA is gravely concerned with the acceleration in violence observed in March, mainly by the Taliban against Afghan national security forces, and the consequent increase in the number of civilian casualties and harm caused², particularly in the northern and north-eastern regions. This concerning trend was all the more notable as it followed a 'reduction in violence' week - 22 February to 28 February - between the Pro-Government Forces and the Taliban that then led to the agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban on 29 February.

Throughout the first quarter, ground engagements were the leading cause of civilian casualties causing almost one-third of the overall total, followed by targeted killings and non-suicide IEDs. Targeted killings were the leading cause of civilian deaths. Civilians living in Kabul, Balkh and Faryab provinces were most affected (in that order). The number of civilian deaths attributed to Anti-Government Elements – particularly the Taliban – increased by 22 per cent in the first quarter of 2020 as compared to the same time period in 2019, mainly due to a disturbing increase in targeted killings and summary executions. Although UNAMA documented an overall reduction in civilian casualties caused by the

Afghan national security forces for the quarter, it is concerned that their operations led to an uptick in civilian casualties in March - mainly ground engagements, particularly from the use of indirect fire, and airstrikes.

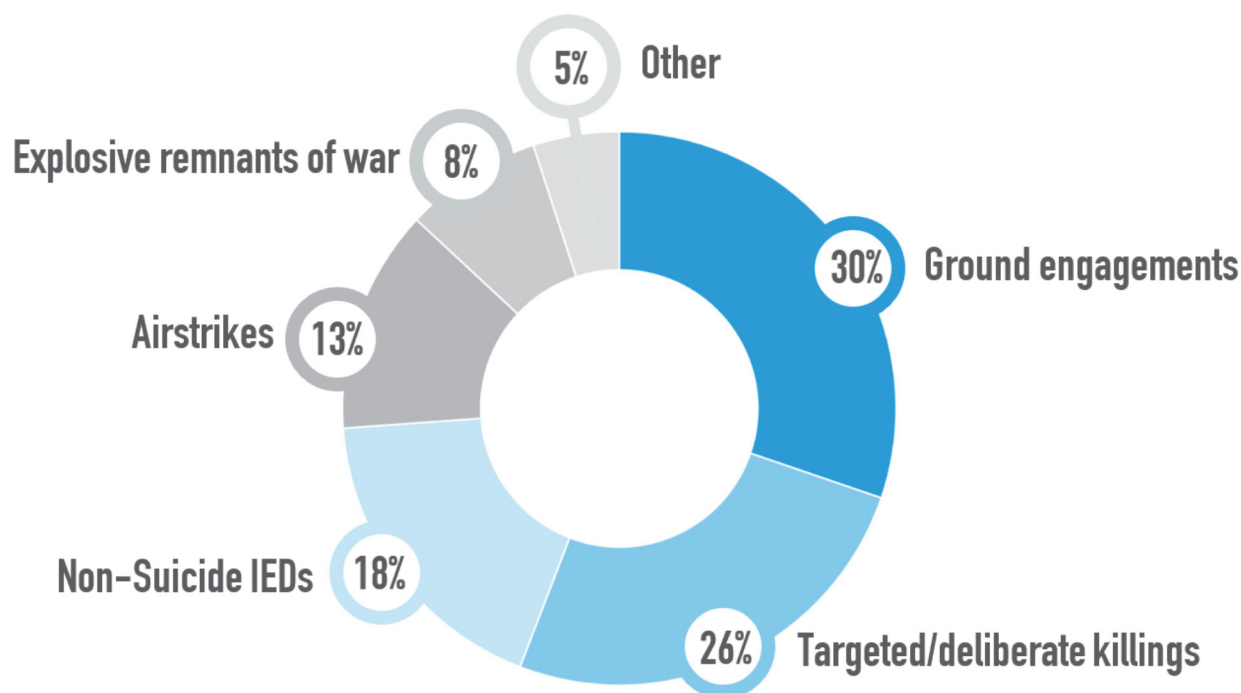
Anti-Government Elements

Anti-Government Elements continued to be responsible for the majority of civilian casualties – 55 per cent - during the first quarter, causing 710 civilian casualties (282 killed and 428 injured). UNAMA attributed 39 per cent to Taliban³, 13 per cent to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP)⁴ and the remainder to undetermined Anti-Government Elements.

UNAMA verified a significant decrease of civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban during the first two months of the year in comparison to the same period in 2019, particularly from a drastic reduction in suicide and complex attacks. However, in the month of March, following the reduction in vio-

UNAMA is specifically concerned about an increase in civilian deaths from intentional targeting of civilians by Anti-Government Elements during the first quarter of 2020.

Civilian Casualties by Incident Type 1 January to 31 March 2020



lence week and the signing of the 29 February agreement between the US and the Taliban, civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban increased in comparison to March 2019, mainly due to a notable increase in civilian deaths resulting from non-suicide IEDs and ground engagements.

UNAMA is specifically concerned about an increase in civilian deaths from intentional targeting of civilians during the first quarter of 2020, as compared to 2019. Two of the most egregious incidents were mass shootings claimed by ISIL-KP in March: an attack on 6 March at a commemoration for a Hazara leader in Kabul, which killed 34 civilians and injured 78 more, and an attack on 25 March on worshippers at a Sikh-Hindu temple in Kabul, which

killed 26 civilians and injured 11 more. Targeted killings of civilians by the Taliban included the killing of a health worker in Zazi Aryoub district of Paktya province on 20 January; a judge in Injil district of Herat province on 17 February; and a teacher in Khogyani district of Nangarhar province on 13 March.

UNAMA documented a disturbing increase in abductions of civilians carried out by the Taliban in the first quarter of 2020 as compared to 2019, with a spike occurring during the reduction in violence period at the end of February and the subsequent month of March.⁵ UNAMA is gravely concerned by abduction cases that have led to summary executions, including an incident on 6 March in Kushk

district of Herat province in which seven adult men, including a teacher, were abducted and killed by Taliban a few kilometres from their village.⁶

Furthermore, UNAMA documented an increase in civilian deaths from pressure-plate IEDs, which function as improvised anti-personnel landmines. During the first quarter, UNAMA documented 100 civilian casualties (47 killed and 53 injured) from pressure-plate IEDs, all of which were attributed to the Taliban.

UNAMA reiterates that deliberate targeting of civilians or civilian objects is prohibited under international law; the killing, by any party to the conflict, of persons taking no active part in hostilities is explicitly prohibited by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions at any time and any place, and may amount to a war crime. Furthermore, the use of pressure-plate IEDs, which are victim-operated, are indiscriminate by nature and therefore considered to be unlawful at all times.

Pro-Government Forces

Pro-Government Forces were responsible for 32 per cent of all civilian casualties during the first quarter of 2020, causing 412 civilian casualties (198 killed and 214 injured). Of concern, Pro-Government Forces were responsible for more child casualties than Anti-Government Elements during the first three months of the year and over twice as many child deaths⁷, mainly due to airstrikes and indirect

Although for the overall quarter, UNAMA documented a significant reduction in civilian casualties caused by the Afghan national security forces, UNAMA is concerned by the uptick in civilian casualties from their operations in March.

fire during ground engagements. UNAMA attributed 21 per cent of overall civilian casualties to Afghan national security forces⁸, eight per cent to international military forces⁹ and the remainder to pro-government armed groups and undetermined or multiple Pro-Government Forces. The last civilian casualty incident of the quarter attributed to international military forces occurred on 17 February, before the 'reduction in violence' week, when an airstrike in Kushk district of Herat province resulted in the deaths of eight civilians (three women and five children).

UNAMA documented a significant reduction in civilian casualties caused by the Afghan national security forces, including as a result of less civilian casualties from search operations. However, UNAMA is concerned about a rise in civilian casualties attributed to Afghan national security forces in the second half of March, mainly due to ground engagements and airstrikes.

The vast majority of civilian casualties caused by Afghan national security forces during the first quarter of 2020 occurred during ground engagements, particularly as a result of the use of indirect fire. For example, on 7 February, in Zari district of Balkh province, the Afghan National Army fired approximately a dozen mortars in a residential area, resulting in the deaths of two civilians (a woman and a 14-year-old girl) and the injury of nine others, mostly women and children. On 16 March in Khan Abad district of Kunduz province, eight civilians (including six boys) were killed and two girls sustained injuries when the Afghan National Army shot artillery rounds from a base targeting Taliban positions, which impacted civilians gathered outside a shop.¹⁰

UNAMA is also concerned by recent airstrikes by the Afghan Air Force causing civilian harm, including the airstrike on 21 March in Imam Sahib district of Kunduz province targeting Taliban, which killed 11 civilians including seven children and three women, and injured a woman and a girl.

UNAMA repeats its call on the Government of Afghanistan to cease the use of indirect fire (mortars, rockets and grenades) and other explosives with wide area effects in populated areas, and to continue to develop and improve tactical directives, rules of engagement and other procedures in relation to the use of armed aircraft.

Incidents affecting healthcare facilities and workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

UNAMA verified 18 incidents impacting healthcare in the first quarter of 2020; 17 of these incidents were attributed to the Taliban.¹¹ The Taliban incidents included a direct attack targeting a clinic; intentional killings and abduction of protected personnel; threats against healthcare personnel and facilities; and damage to healthcare facilities caused by fighting in the area. The threats have led to the temporary closure of almost 50 clinics across the country, with the highest number of incidents occurring in the Eastern region.

Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health confirmed the first case of the novel coronavirus - COVID-19 – in the country on 24 February.¹² As of the end of the first quarter, 196 cases of COVID-19 had been confirmed with Herat province remaining the most affected part of the country; hundreds more cases have been confirmed at the time of writing.¹³

During the COVID-19 pandemic, any incidents affecting medical facilities or personnel can have particularly serious and wide-ranging consequences impacting individuals' access to essential healthcare services.

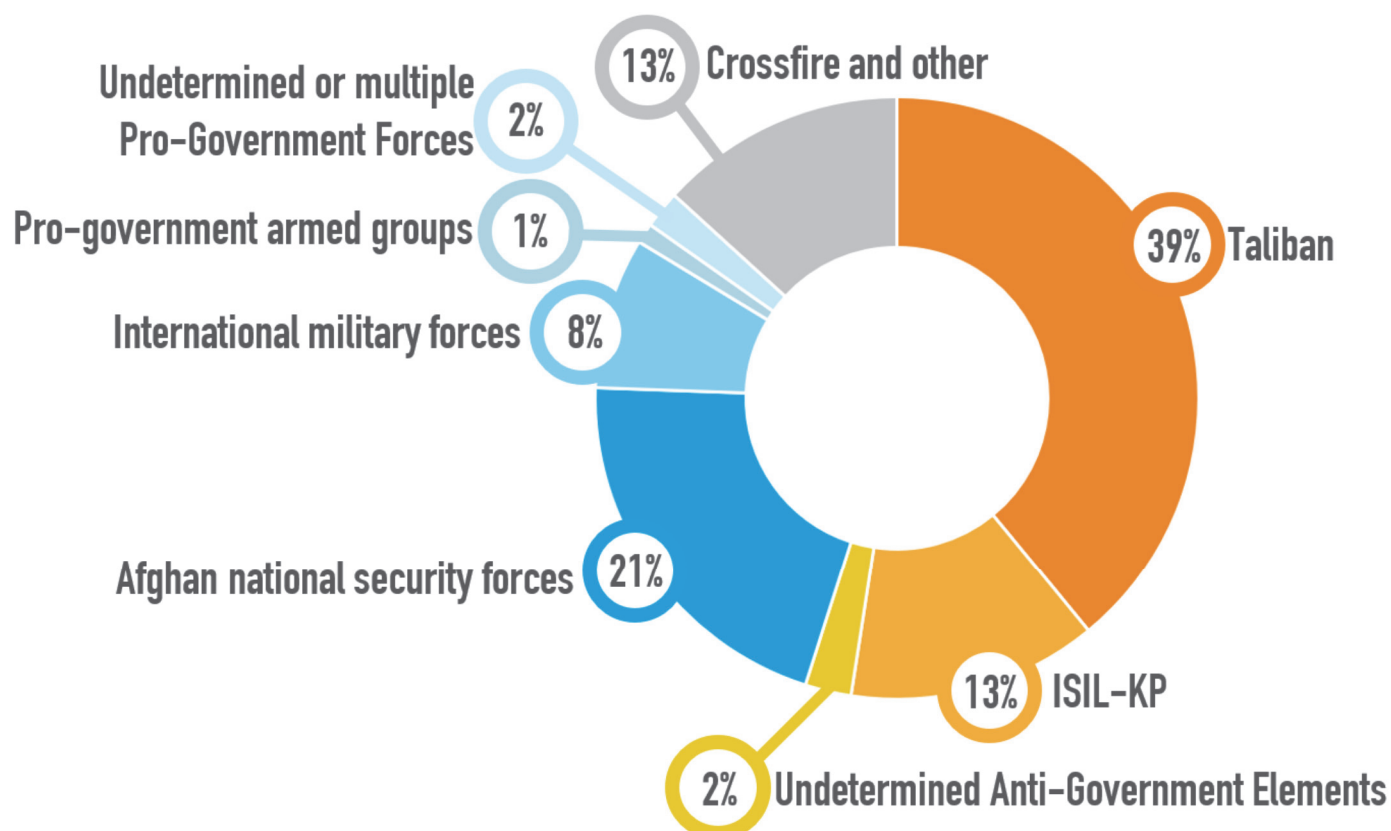
The Taliban made public statements on 16 and 18 March indicating that they would work with international organizations in combatting COVID-19, and would facilitate the movement of medical equipment, medicine and aid to areas under its control.¹⁴ However, after these statements were made, UNAMA documented two incidents impacting healthcare, both of which involved the Taliban. On 22 March 2020, in Kunar province, Chapadara district, a group of Taliban fighters abducted five health workers and their driver who were in the area to evaluate a health facility, holding them for two days until they were released through the mediation of tribal elders. On 24 March 2020, in Takhar province, Dasht-e-Qala district, fighting erupted be-

tween Taliban and Afghan national security forces in the area. The firefight started near a hospital and continued for three hours with Taliban and Afghan national security forces using indirect fire. One rocket fired by the Taliban impacted a bazaar in the district center, killing a 14-year old boy and injuring three other civilians including two boys. The local hospital sustained damage due to the close proximity of the fighting.

Under international humanitarian law, medical facilities and personnel must be respected and protected in all circumstances.¹⁵ Intentional attacks on medical facilities or protected personnel may amount to war crimes.¹⁶ During the COVID-19

Civilian Casualty by Party to the Conflict

1 January to 31 March 2020



pandemic, any incidents affecting medical facilities or personnel can have particularly serious and wide-ranging consequences impacting individuals' access to essential healthcare services. UNAMA calls on all parties to immediately cease fighting in the vicinity of healthcare facilities as well as the use of indirect fire (mortars, rockets, grenades) in populated areas that could impact healthcare facilities, medical transports, and patients' access to health care. UNAMA calls on the Taliban to immediately cease all direct attacks and threats against healthcare facilities and workers, as well as abductions of healthcare workers.

Methodology

For the purposes of its reports on the protection of civilians, UNAMA only includes verified civilian casualties. Civilian casualties are recorded as 'verified' where, based on the totality of the information reviewed by UNAMA, it has determined that there is 'clear and convincing' evidence that civilians have been killed or injured. In order to meet this standard, UNAMA requires at least three different and independent types of sources, i.e. victim, witness, medical practitioner, local authorities, confirmation by a party to the conflict, community leader or other sources. Wherever possible, information is obtained from the primary accounts of victims and/or witnesses of the incident and through

on-site fact-finding. Where UNAMA is not satisfied with the reliability and credibility of information concerning civilian casualties, it will not consider it as verified. Unverified incidents are not included in this report. UNAMA does not claim that the statistics presented in this report are complete and acknowledges possible under-reporting of civilian casualties given limitations inherent in the operating environment, particularly considering the recent challenges posed by movement restrictions in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more detailed information, please consult the UNAMA annual reports on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (available at: <http://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>)

Endnotes

1. See <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20032.doc.htm>.
2. UNAMA documented the following total civilian casualties per month during the first quarter of 2020: 375 civilian casualties (169 killed and 206 injured) in January; 362 civilian casualties (151 killed and 211 injured) in February; and 556 civilian casualties (213 killed and 343 injured) in March.
3. In the first quarter of 2020, UNAMA attributed 505 civilian casualties (215 killed and 290 injured) to the Taliban.
4. In the first quarter of 2020, UNAMA attributed 173 civilian casualties (63 killed and 110 injured) to ISIL-KP.
5. In the first quarter 2020, UNAMA documented 282 civilians abducted by the Taliban in comparison to 146 abductees in the same period of 2019. From 22 February to 31 March 2020, UNAMA documented 214 civilians abducted by the Taliban.
6. At the time of writing, this incident remains under investigation by the Taliban's Commission for the Prevention of Civilian Casualties and Complaints.
7. UNAMA attributed 146 child casualties (39 killed and 107 injured) to Anti-Government Elements and 176 child casualties (86 killed and 90 injured) to Pro-Government Forces.
8. In the first quarter of 2020, UNAMA attributed 267 civilian casualties (99 killed and 168 injured) to Afghan national security forces.
9. In the first quarter of 2020, UNAMA attributed 105 civilian casualties (80 killed and 25 injured) to international military forces.
10. At the time of writing, this incident remains under investigation by the Afghan National Army.
11. The remaining incident concerned an airstrike on 2 February by the Afghan Air Force targeting the Taliban in Kunduz, which caused damage to a health clinic and a school building. In the first quarter of 2019, UNAMA documented 26 incidents impacting healthcare, 17 of which were attributed to the Taliban. See UNAMA Protection of Civilians First Quarter Report 2019 (24 April 2019), available at: <https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>.
12. On 11 March, the World Health Organization characterized the global COVID-19 situation as a pandemic. See <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.
13. See <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/document/afghanistan-flash-update-covid-19-daily-brief-no-24-01-apr-2020>.
14. See statements of the Taliban on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/suhailshaheen1/status/1239594471576256512?s=20>) and on the Taliban website (<http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=33722>).
15. Medical facilities and personnel only lose their protection if they are being used or if they commit, outside of their humanitarian function, acts harmful to the enemy. See ICRC Customary International Humanitarian Law, 2005, Volume I: Rules, Rules 25 and 28, accessible at: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1>; and Protocol additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts, 8 June 1977, Articles 9 and 11.

16. Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Articles 8(2) (c), (e)(i), (e)(ii). Attacks and threats against healthcare facilities and workers are also considered one of the “six grave violations against children” in situations of armed conflict, as defined in UN Security Council resolutions. See <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/>.