Between 1 January and 31 March 2021, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 1,783 civilian casualties (573 killed and 1,210 injured), highlighting the urgent need for measures to reduce violence and the ultimate, overarching need to reach a lasting peace agreement. The number of civilians killed and injured increased by 29 per cent compared with the first quarter of 2020; this also included increases in both women (up 37 per cent) and child casualties (up 23 per cent).\(^1\) Of specific concern, UNAMA documented a 38 per cent increase in civilian casualties in the six months after the start of the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations in September 2020 in comparison to the same period a year earlier, demonstrating that the current talks have not resulted in reducing the scale of harm to civilians.\(^2\)

The increase in civilian casualties compared with the first quarter of 2020 was mainly driven by the same trends that caused the increase of civilian casualties in the last quarter of last year – ground engagements, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and targeted killings all continued to have an extreme impact on civilians during this year’s comparatively warm winter. In addition, there was no agreement by the parties to reduce violence in the first three months of 2021, which could have had a significant positive impact on civilians, as the reduction in violence week had in February 2020.\(^3\) UNAMA has reiterated repeatedly that it has documented measurable decreases in the number of civilian casualties during ceasefires. It urges parties to prioritize civilians and agree to reduce violence as they negotiate for peace, with the Islamic

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\(^1\) From 1 January to 31 March 2021, UNAMA documented 552 child casualties (151 killed and 401 injured) and 232 women casualties (64 killed and 168 injured) in comparison to 448 child casualties (153 killed and 295 injured) and 169 women casualties (59 killed and 110 injured) in the same period of 2020.

\(^2\) From 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021, UNAMA documented 4,582 civilian casualties (1,467 killed and 3,115 injured) in comparison to 3,318 civilian casualties (1,290 killed and 2,028 injured) in the same period a year earlier.

UNAMA documented an increase in civilian casualties in the six months after the start of the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations; parties must prioritize civilians and agree to reduce violence as they negotiate for peace, starting from the Ramadan period.

holy month of Ramadan as a starting point. UNAMA also reminds parties that on 26 February 2021, the United Nations Security Council reconfirmed its demand for a general and immediate cessation of hostilities.\(^4\)

In the first three months of 2021, ground engagements caused the most civilian harm, responsible for 38 per cent of all civilian casualties, followed by non-suicide IEDs (31 per cent) and targeted killings (19 per cent). Compared with the first quarter of 2020, the number of civilian casualties from ground engagements increased by 56 per cent, the number of civilian casualties from non-suicide IEDs increased by 117 per cent, and UNAMA documented an increase in the number of targeted killings,\(^5\) while airstrikes and suicide attacks caused far fewer civilian casualties.

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\(^4\) Security Council Resolution 2565 (26 February 2021), paragraph 2.

\(^5\) In the first three months of 2021, the number of targeted killing incidents increased by 40 per cent in comparison to the same period in 2020. The number of civilian deaths from these incidents increased to 177 killed civilians in the first three months of 2021 in comparison to 169 killed civilians in the same period the year prior. UNAMA targeted killing figures include both targeting of civilians and civilians incidentally impacted from targeting of other individuals. See UNAMA Protection of Civilians Annual Report 2020 glossary for details.
Anti-Government Elements continued to be responsible for the majority, 61 per cent, of all civilian casualties in the first three months of 2021, while Pro-Government Forces continued to cause approximately one quarter (27 per cent) of the total civilian casualties. UNAMA documented increases in the number of civilian casualties attributed to both the Taliban (up 39 per cent) and the Afghan National Army (up 35 per cent), with the Taliban responsible for 43.5 per cent of all civilian casualties,\textsuperscript{6} and the Afghan National Army responsible for 17 per cent.\textsuperscript{7}

UNAMA remains deeply concerned about the continued deliberate targeting of civilians by Anti-Government Elements, particularly through targeted killings, referred to by many as “assassinations”\textsuperscript{8}. Throughout the first quarter of 2021, these attacks continued, including targeting of media workers, civil society activists, members of the judiciary and the civilian government administration, including a particularly worrying trend of targeting of women. For example, on 17 January, in Kabul city, gunmen on a motorcycle shot and killed two female judges of the Supreme Court and injured their driver when they were on their way to their offices. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. In another example, on 2 March, three female staff from a local radio station in Jalalabad city were

\textsuperscript{6} UNAMA attributed 779 civilian casualties (229 killed and 550 injured) to the Taliban between 1 January and 31 March 2021.

\textsuperscript{7} UNAMA attributed 299 civilian casualties (94 killed and 205 injured) to the Afghan National Army (including the Afghan Air Force) between 1 January and 31 March 2021.

Between 1 January and 31 March 2021, UNAMA documented 347 civilian casualties (63 killed and 284 injured) from magnetic and/or remote detonated IEDs, compared with 110 civilian casualties (17 killed and 93 injured) during the same period in 2020.

Between 1 January and 31 March 2021, UNAMA documented 65 civilian casualties (six killed and 65 injured) from non-suicide vehicle-borne IEDs, compared with 25 civilian casualties (10 killed and 15 injured) in the same period in 2020.

Between 1 January and 31 March 2021, pressure-plate IEDs caused 93 civilian casualties (44 killed and 49 injured), compared with 110 civilian casualties (47 killed and 63 injured) during the same period in 2020.

At the time of the publication of the report, UNAMA did not attribute civilian casualties to international military forces that occurred between 1 January and 31 March 2021, but continued to follow-up on credible allegations of such incidents.

The first three months of 2021 also marked the continuation of positive trends from 2020 where, in contrast to previous years, there was a dearth of
civilian casualties caused by two incident types – airstrikes by international military forces and suicide attacks by Anti-Government Elements. As noted in UNAMA’s 2020 protection of civilians reports, these incident types have caused significantly fewer civilian casualties since the 29 February 2020 United States-Taliban agreement.

UNAMA remains concerned about the continuation of attacks on health and education in the first three months of 2021 at levels similar to the same period in 2020. These include both direct attacks and fighting causing incidental damage to schools, hospitals, and their personnel. Of specific concern is the organised attack by Anti-Government Elements on the polio vaccination campaign in Jalalabad on 30 March that killed three female vaccinators in two separate attacks. On the same day, in Jalalabad city, an IED damaged a polio vaccination office and another female polio vaccination worker escaped an attack targeting her. Sources attributed the attacks to ISIL-KP, though no group claimed responsibility. These attacks are especially horrendous, taking into account the context of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, the start of the roll-out of related vaccines and the backlog in polio vaccinations due to COVID-19.

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 the limitations inherent in the operating environment, particularly considering the recent challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures.

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

15 In the first three months of 2021, UNAMA documented 21 attacks against healthcare and 13 attacks against education, in comparison to 18 attacks against healthcare and eight attacks against education in the first three months of 2020.