

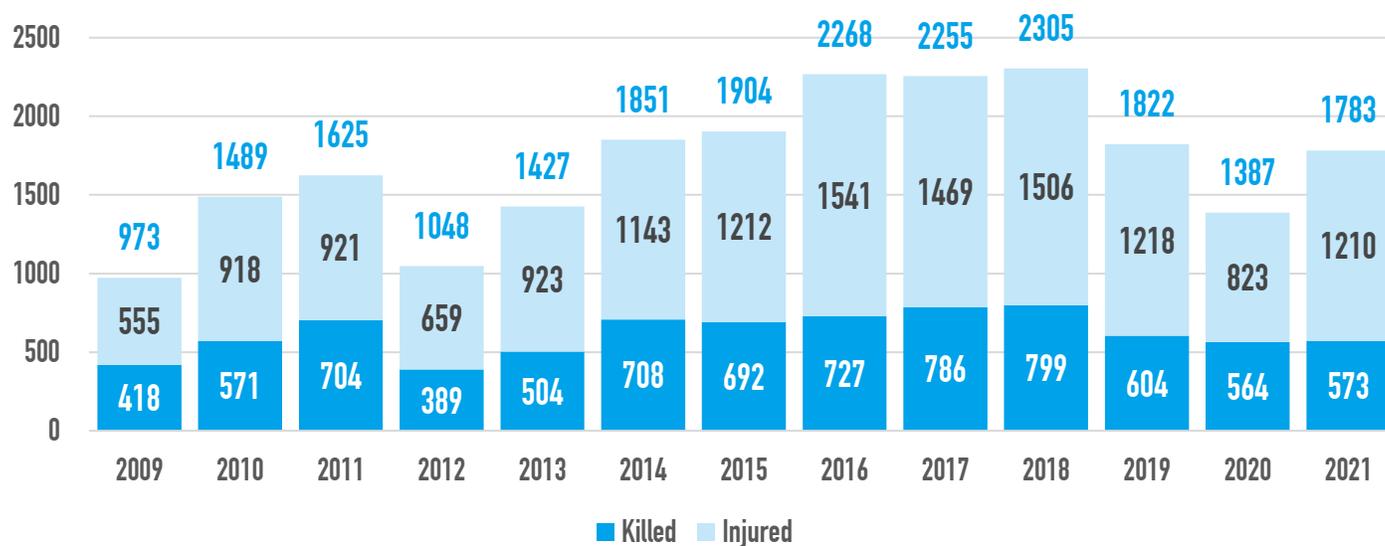
AFGHANISTAN

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN ARMED CONFLICT FIRST QUARTER UPDATE: 1 JANUARY TO 31 MARCH 2021

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

Civilians Killed and Injured
1 January to 31 March 2009–2021



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.

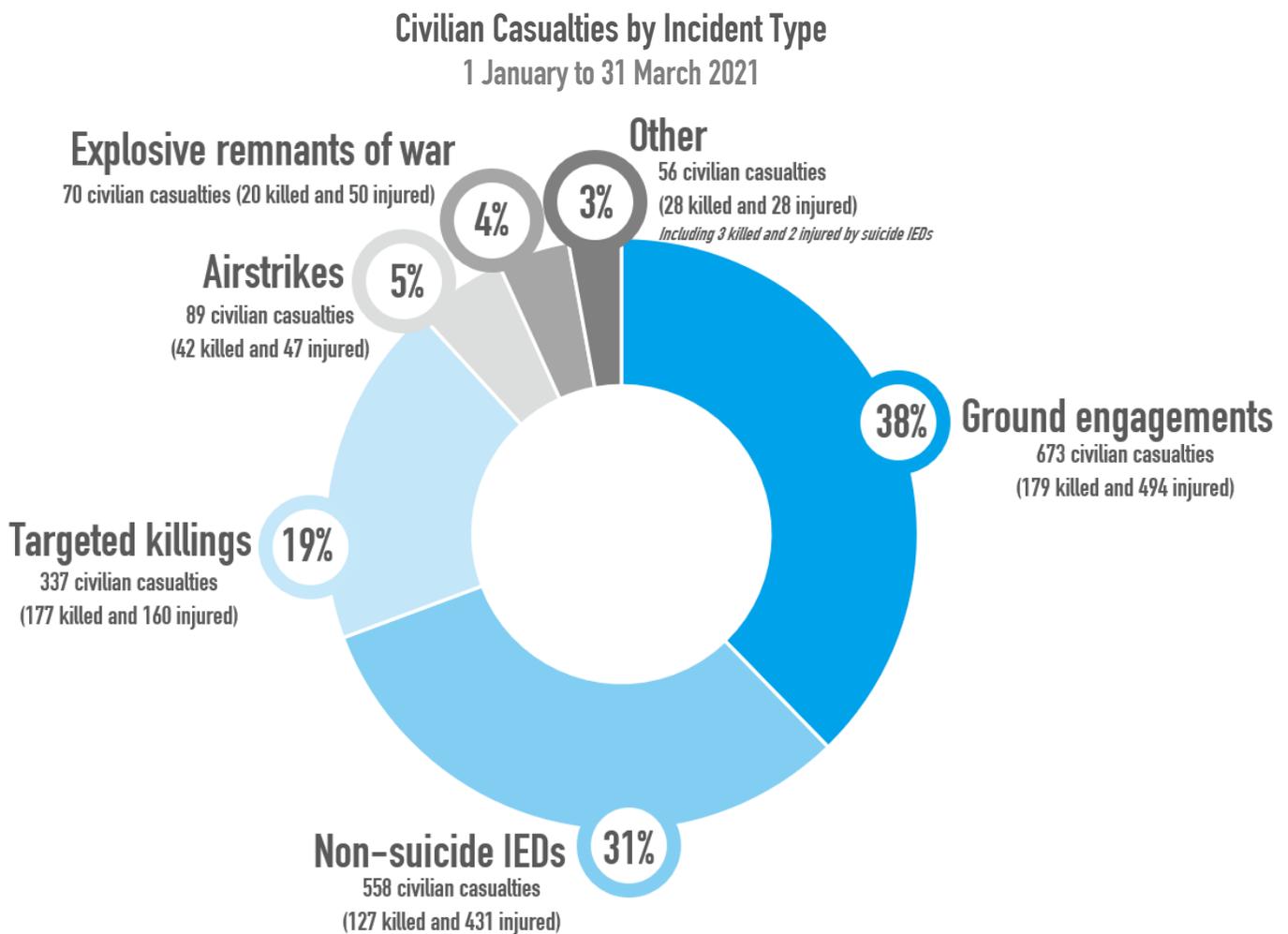
³ See UNAMA 2020 First Quarterly Report, April 2020, available at: <http://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>.

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.



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

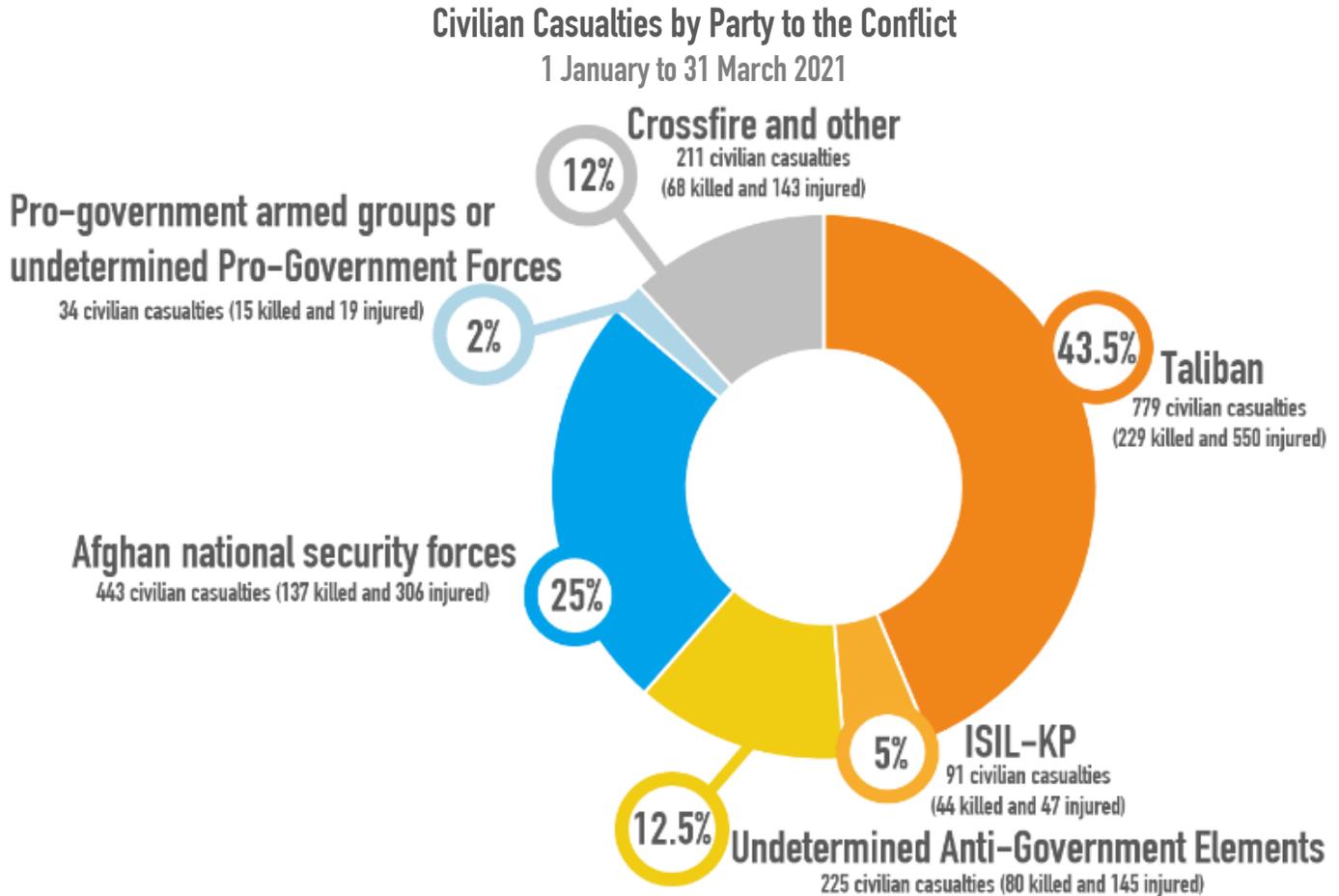
⁵ In the first three months of 2021, the number of targeted killing incidents increased by 40 per cent in comparison to the same period in 2020. The number of civilian deaths from these incidents increased to 177 killed civilians in the first three months of 2021 in comparison to 169 killed civilians 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,⁶ and the Afghan National Army responsible for 17 per cent.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”.⁸ Throughout the first quarter of 2021, these attacks continued,

UNAMA documented increases in the number of civilian casualties attributed to both the Taliban and the Afghan National Army.

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



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

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.

⁸ See UNAMA Special Report on Killing of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, and Media Workers in Afghanistan, 15 February 2021, available at: <http://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>.

shot and killed by gunmen on their way home from work. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) claimed responsibility.

UNAMA reminds Anti-Government Elements that the deliberate targeting of civilians is prohibited under international law and constitutes a war crime. The mission urges Anti-Government Elements to apply a definition of civilian that accords with international law and to immediately cease all targeting of civilians.

UNAMA reiterates its concern about the use of explosive weapons with wide area effect in populated areas. For example, on 12 March, in Balkh province, Sholgara district, indirect fire during a ground engagement between the Taliban and the Afghan National Army landed on a house, killing a two-year-old girl and injuring nine other civilians, mostly children. UNAMA could not identify which of the two parties was responsible, and therefore jointly attributed it to both.

Of further concern is the continuation of the increase in civilian casualties from the use of non-suicide IEDs by Anti-Government Elements, which rose by 117 per cent compared with the number of civilian casualties recorded in the first quarter of 2020. The vast majority of the harm to civilians from non-suicide IEDs occurred as a result of magnetic and/or remote detonated IEDs, from which UNAMA documented a 215 per cent increase in the number of civilian casualties compared with the same period in 2020.⁹ UNAMA also documented an increase in non-suicide vehicle-borne IEDs.¹⁰ For example, on 21 February, in Kabul city, a remote-controlled IED placed inside a flowerpot on the side of the road was detonated as a civilian official from the Ministry of the Interior was passing by in his vehicle. This resulted in the killing of three civilian Afghan National Police officers and one seven-year-old boy, as well as the injuring of 13 civilians (eight men,

UNAMA remains deeply concerned about the continued deliberate targeting of civilians by Anti-Government Elements, particularly through targeted killings, and reiterates that such attacks are serious violations of international humanitarian law and may amount to war crimes.

two women, and three girls). Conversely, UNAMA documented a reduction in the number of civilian casualties caused by pressure-plate IEDs,¹¹ an encouraging trend that, if continued, can have a significant life-saving impact.

The overall reduction in civilian casualties from airstrikes in the first three months of 2021, attributable to the dearth of civilian casualties from airstrikes by international military forces¹², was partially offset by a 31 per cent increase in the number of civilian casualties attributed to Afghan Air Force airstrikes compared with the same period in 2020.¹³ In one incident, on 10 January, in Khash Rod district, Nimroz province, an airstrike conducted by the Afghan Air Force targeting the Taliban killed 18 civilians including seven girls, six women, and four boys; two civilian men were injured. The Government of Afghanistan quickly reacted to reports of civilian casualties, indicating that investigations were underway to determine the details of this incident.¹⁴ UNAMA welcomes, as always, such responses to civilian casualty allegations, and reiterates that the results of such investigations should be made publicly available in a timely manner.

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

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ Between 1 January and 31 March 2021, UNAMA documented 85 civilian casualties (41 killed and 44 injured) from 22 Afghan Air Force airstrikes, compared with 65 civilian casualties (33 killed and 32 injured) from 13 incidents during the same period in 2020.

¹⁴ See, the message of condolence from President Ghani on Twitter, https://twitter.com/ARG_AFG/status/1348597675701248002?s=20.

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 2020.¹⁵ 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-19.¹⁶

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.

¹⁶ See, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/polio-vaccination-campaigns-resume-afghanistan-and-pakistan-after-covid-19>.