



UNAMA Mid-Year Report 2017: Number of civilian casualties still at “record level”

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The number of civilians in the war in Afghanistan remained on “record high levels” in the first six months of 2017, with Kabul remaining the most affected city in the country. These are the two main features that stand out in UNAMA’s just released mid-year report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. It appears that, in summary, any progress in protecting civilians from some types of violence is undermined by relapses in others. AAN’s Jelena Bjelica and Thomas Ruttig summarise the main findings of the report, including the key conflict trends UNAMA observed in the first half of the year.

The UNAMA statistics of war, January to June 2017

How many killed and injured

1,662 Afghan civilians have been documented as killed and 3,581 more as injured in the first six



months of 2017 in UNAMA's latest mid-year report on protection of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. The report released on Monday 17 July 2017 shows that the total number of civilian casualties decreased slightly, by 24 persons in total (or 0.5 per cent). Compared to the same period in 2016, its authors speak of "the same record high levels." (The report is available [here](#)).

The 11,418 civilians killed or injured in 2016 set a grisly new record – it is the highest number recorded by UNAMA in any year since it started systematic documentation in 2009 (see AAN's previous report [here](#)). The same went for the 5,166 civilian casualties in that year's first half. The new 2017 figures bring the total number of casualties registered by the UN since 2009 to more than 26,500 dead and just under 49,000 injured. (1)

As before, the authors of the UNAMA report point out that they use "at least three different and independent types of sources [to verify numbers], i.e. victim, witness, medical practitioner, local authorities, confirmation by party to the conflict, community leader or other sources" for each casualty included in the report. Given the stringent verification standard, this also means there may be many more casualties than UNAMA is able to confirm.

The new UNAMA report's figures also do not include yet the victims of the fighting in Kunduz province in early July, ie after the reporting period (AAN reported on that incident [here](#)).

Women and Children

The decrease in women casualties UNAMA documented in 2016 reversed course during the first six months of 2017. A total of 174 adult women were confirmed killed and 462 more injured, an overall rise of 23 per cent over the same period last year. Child casualties increased by a further one per cent, with 436 deaths and 1,141 injuries recorded. Children accounted for 30 per cent of all civilian casualties. (2) Both among women and children, the number of those killed rose more steeply than those injured (by 33 and nine per cent, respectively).

Children, particularly boys, continued to comprise the majority – 81 per cent (81 deaths and 215 injured) – of all civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war. (In total there were 192 such documented incidents with 365 civilian casualties – 93 deaths and 272 injured – an increase of six per cent compared to the same period in 2016.) In addition to those killed, explosive remnants of war caused life-changing injuries to children alongside severe emotional and psychological trauma where children witnessed the deaths of siblings or friends. In the first six months of 2017, UNAMA continued to record cases in which children lost eyesight and/or limbs, particularly legs.

UNAMA also noted that the use of pressure-plate improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and aerial operations in civilian-populated areas contributed substantially to the increases in both women and child casualties.

How they were killed and injured – key trends in conflict



Key trends UNAMA observed include a 15 per cent increase in civilian casualties from IEDs and a ten per cent decrease in the number of casualties caused by ground engagements between anti-government elements and pro-government forces. The report noted:

The indiscriminate and unlawful use of IED tactics (IEDs, suicide and complex attacks) by Anti-Government Elements in civilian-populated areas - particularly suicide bombs and pressure-plate devices caused 2,079 civilian casualties (596 deaths and 1,483 injured), accounting for 40 per cent of all civilian casualties in the first six months of 2017.

Within this figure, suicide and complex attacks caused 1,151 civilian casualties (259 deaths and 892 injured), a 15 per cent increase compared to the first six months of 2016. In the first half of 2017, more civilian deaths and injury from suicide and complex attacks were documented by UNAMA than any previous six-month period since the mission began systematic documentation (in 2009).

The UN mission in Afghanistan underlined that many of those casualties occurred in a single attack in Kabul city on 31 May, when a truck bomb killed at least 92 civilians and injured nearly 500, the deadliest incident documented by UNAMA since 2001. (See also AAN reporting about the 31 May suicide attack [here](#) and [here](#).)

The decrease in the number of civilians killed in ground engagements is attributed to a reduction in casualties caused by indirect fire and/or explosive weapons (mostly mortars) by the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Despite the decrease, ground engagements remained the second-leading cause of civilian casualties, with a total of 1,809 documented (434 deaths and 1,375 injured).

Furthermore, UNAMA noted a 43 per cent rise in civilian casualties as a result of aerial operations (95 deaths and 137 injuries). Roughly two-thirds of those were caused by international and one-third by the Afghan air force.

The report also notes that the number of civilian killed and injured by the Afghan Local Police (ALP) more than doubled, to 15 and 49, respectively, despite “increased efforts by the Afghan Local Police Directorate [of the Ministry of Interior (MoI)] in the area of accountability throughout 2016” (see AAN analysis of planned ALP reform [here](#)). It noted cases in northern, eastern and southern Afghanistan (in land and personal disputes in Kunduz and Takhar, in ground fighting in Laghman and Nangrahar as well as in retaliation in Zabul provinces). At the same time, the casualty numbers attributed to pro-government armed groups (‘militias’ and ‘uprising forces’) fell by 60 per cent. Most of their 2017 victims, so far, were caused in Faryab province, “as in 2016;” this points to forces loyal to Vice-President Abdul Rashid Dostum (AAN on these operations, [here](#)).

Who is responsible?

All anti-government elements (this includes mainly the Taliban, but also Islamic State Khorasan



Province [ISKP], the local franchise of what is known as Daesh among Afghans, and other Afghan and foreign insurgent groups) caused more than two-thirds of all registered civilian casualties in the first six months of 2017. This totals 1,141 people killed and 2,348 injured, a 12 per cent increase in comparison to the first six months of last year. The larger share was attributed to the Taliban (43%), compared to five per cent for ISKP – roughly a ration of 9:1.

In 19 per cent of casualties caused by anti-government elements, UNAMA was not able to identify the perpetrators. This was especially stark in the case with the 31 May 2017 tanker bomb attack in Kabul (see AAN reporting here: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-black-week-in-kabul-terror-and-protests/>). For UNAMA, an attribution requires a public acknowledgement of responsibility, which did not happen thereafter, from any group (see AAN analysis of the case [here](#)).

ISKP in particular continued to target Afghanistan's Shia minority in the first half of 2017. UNAMA attributed four such attacks to ISKP or ISKP-linked groups in three provinces (two in Herat and one each in Kabul and Sar-e-Pul). In January, unidentified armed anti-government elements killed eight coal miners, most of whom were Hazara, in the Tala wa Barfak district of Baghlan and further injured three others. Apart from the above-mentioned Kabul attack, the group claimed three other suicide attacks and one complex attack in the capital that did not have an explicitly sectarian bent.

UNAMA attributed a total of 327 civilian deaths and 618 injuries (18 per cent) to pro-government forces, a 21 per cent decrease compared with the same period last year. The greatest proportion (15 per cent) was caused by the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), which includes the army and air force, the Afghan National and the Afghan Local Police. The international military forces were responsible for two per cent and irregular pro-government armed groups for one per cent.

Unattributed crossfire between anti-government elements and pro-government forces caused ten per cent of civilian casualties, and five per cent came from the detonation of unattributed explosive remnants of war. Crossborder shelling by Pakistan Military Forces caused the remaining one per cent.

What are the deadliest places in Afghanistan?

The highest number of casualties among the civilian population (19 per cent of the total dead and injured) occurred in Kabul province, mainly as a result of suicide and complex attacks. A total of 219 deaths and 829 injured were recorded there (1,048 in total), a 26 per cent increase from last year, almost all of them in the city. (3)

High-profile incidents in the capital overshadowed similarly grave developments in the provinces. In Helmand, the province with the second-highest number of casualties, the number of deaths and injuries combined almost doubled. In another 13 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces in all seven regions of the country – Kapisa, Daikundi, Laghman, Nuristan, Faryab, Khost, Paktya,



Jawzjan, Badghis, Farah, Ghor, Herat and Zabul – civilian casualties also increased, mainly due to increased attacks by anti-government forces. This geographical spread indicates the country-wide character of the war. It , also corresponds with latest UN figures on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) that reveal at least 163,000 people were newly displaced by 16 July 2017 in 31 provinces (for more details, see [here](#)).

Highest numbers of civilian casualties, after Kabul and Helmand, occurred in Kandahar, Nangarhar, Uruzgan, Faryab, Herat, Laghman, Kunduz and Farah provinces.

UNAMA recommendations and conclusions

The UNAMA report stresses that violence continues to kill and maim civilians in nearly every conceivable setting of day-to-day life. “Civilians lost their lives, limbs, sight or suffered harm while inside of their own homes, travelling on public roads, attending classes, praying in mosques, purchasing food, playing outside, working in offices, labouring in agricultural fields, visiting the bank, and lying in hospital beds,” the report stated. Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and UNAMA head, used the term “ugly war.” He condemned the use of explosive devices, including improvised ones, as “indiscriminate, disproportionate and illegal” according to international law, and – given the high children casualty figures caused by them – “particularly appalling.”

The harm caused to civilians in such attacks also contradicts repeated orders and instructions from the Taliban leadership to its commanders and fighters, repeated just recently in their leader’s “Instructions to the Mujahedin” (AAN analysis [here](#)). UNAMA also demands that these directives be enforced.

UNAMA does not spare the government and its international allies from criticism. It demands the end of mortar and rocket shelling that “have a devastating impact in civilian populated areas.” Furthermore, it urges the government (and indirectly its Western sponsors) to disband “illegal armed groups, militias and ‘national uprising movements’,” recognising their long-term destabilising affect despite any temporary decline in harm done to civilians by some of those groups.

UNAMA also demands improved “operational practice and accountability, as well as to ensur[e] operations are carried out in line with obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law” from US troops, the only international air force in Afghanistan still conducting drone and air strikes. Air strikes (counted in the first half of every year) have reached 2011 levels again, the penultimate year of the US troop surge under President Obama. By 2014, civilian casualties caused by all air strikes, Afghan and international, had declined year by year to one-sixth of the 2011 level. That figure has continuously increased under the new mission, Resolute Support.

UNAMA also reiterated its suggestion that the Taliban and the Afghan government engage in “good-faith systematic tracking of civilian harm” caused by their war. In a situation where peace



talks seem to be further away than in any years since 2008 when the outgoing Bush administration dropped its resistance to negotiating an end to the conflict, such concrete measures could at least contribute to minimising harm to civilians while helping build confidence between parties to the conflict.

(1) The US-based Brown University's [Cost of War Project](#), for example, puts the total figure of Afghan civilians who “died violent deaths as a result of the war” since the beginning of the war in 2001 at more than 31,000 by August 2016.

(2) 2016 was the deadliest for children nationwide, according to UNAMA, see AAN previous analysis [here](#).

(3) 2016 was the deadliest year for Kabulis of all age according to UNAMA, see AAN previous analysis [here](#).