

Civilian death toll soaring in Afghanistan

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A report issued late last month by the Human Rights Unit of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) sheds light on the rising number of innocent Afghan men, women and children who are being killed in order for the US and its allies to consolidate their neo-colonial occupation of the country.

The UNAMA report contrasted the number of officially recorded civilian deaths for the first six months of 2009 with the number in previous years. From January 1 to June 30, it registered 1,013 civilian fatalities, “compared with 818 for the same period in 2008, and 684 in 2007”. In other words, as the Obama administration has escalated the war and sent thousands of additional troops and aircraft to Afghanistan, the number of civilian deaths has soared by 24 percent.

The military activities of both the Taliban-led insurgency, dubbed in the report “Anti Government Elements (AGEs), and the operations of the so-called Pro Government Forces (PGFs)—foreign troops and Afghan government security forces—contributed to the body count.

Insurgent roadside bombings and suicide bombings were blamed for 595 deaths or 59 percent of the casualties. In many cases, civilians were killed during attacks on occupation military targets. American and NATO forces drive convoys through residential areas and have established bases inside Afghan towns and villages in order to prevent them coming under the direct control of the Taliban.

Included in the number of civilian deaths caused by the insurgency are also a number of pro-occupation government officials and employees who were assassinated.

The occupation forces killed 310 of the civilian deaths recorded by UNAMA, or 30.5 percent. “Unknown” or unconfirmed parties were held

responsible for the remaining 108 fatalities, or 10.5 percent.

Air strikes were the main cause of fatalities inflicted by the US and allied forces. UNAMA recorded 40 air attacks that, combined, caused 200 deaths. In June alone, six air strikes killed 51 people, suggesting that the rate is climbing despite proclamations by American generals that greater care is being taken to avoid what the military still calls “collateral damage”.

UNAMA’s assessment of the impact of air strikes would be challenged by many in Afghanistan. The report accepted, for example, the official figure that 63 civilians died in the hours-long May 4 aerial assault on the village of Bala Baluk, in the western province of Farah. Locals continue to insist that the number who died was at least 144. It also accepted that the hundreds of alleged Taliban killed in remote areas of the country by air strikes were in fact combatants.

According to a tally compiled by Associated Press, American and NATO forces claimed to have killed more than 2,310 Taliban this year. In 2008, the tally was over 3,800. With the scale of fighting escalating, the new commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, ordered occupation forces in mid-June to stop giving any estimates on alleged Taliban casualties.

The air strike figure also does not count the hundreds of men, women and children who have been killed this year by missile strikes launched from unmanned US Predator drones over the border in the tribal agencies of Pakistan. The anti-occupation insurgency is supported by the ethnic Pashtun population of the region. In retaliation, the US military is waging a systematic campaign of killings and terror against them.

On June 23, a single US attack on a funeral procession in South Waziristan killed over 80 people. In just two days in July, Predator strikes killed another 80.

Other civilian deaths that may not have been counted,

or been falsely reported as Taliban fatalities, are those inflicted during the regular raids conducted by special forces' units on the homes of suspected insurgent leaders, fighters or financiers.

The report noted: "Implementation of search and seizure operations (including night time raids) are also of concern, and there have been reports of a number of joint Afghan and international military forces operations in which excessive use of force has allegedly resulted in civilian deaths." Agencies such as UNAMA rarely have the ability to independently verify who, and how many, are killed in such actions.

Overall, the UNAMA report makes a pessimistic estimate of the situation facing the US-led occupation in Afghanistan. Far from Obama's surge curbing Afghan resistance to the presence of foreign troops, the Taliban and other insurgents are gaining support and expanding the territory in which they operate.

UNAMA noted: "As the conflict has widened and deepened throughout 2007, 2008 and into 2009, almost a third of the country is now directly affected by insurgent activities with differing intensity. Armed conflict is particularly prevalent in the South, South-East, East, Central, and Western regions of the country. It is also spreading into areas formerly relatively tranquil, such as the North and North-East."

The occupation forces, in response, are "attempting to quell the insurgency and responding to insurgent activity within civilian areas, [and] are also conducting more operations in areas where civilians reside. These factors have resulted in a rising toll in terms of civilian deaths and injuries and destruction of infrastructure, including homes and assets, which are essential for survival and the maintenance of livelihoods."

The result will be greater numbers of Afghan civilians losing their lives, particularly in the continuing air strikes against alleged Taliban targets. On July 30, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that McChrystal had instructed that the Predator drones previously used for hunting for Al Qaeda leaders in remote mountainous areas of the country be focused instead on operations in "major insurgent strongholds"—i.e., areas with large civilian populations.

McChrystal has also requested that at least another dozen of the unmanned aircraft be dispatched from the US to Afghanistan. Central Command has further ordered the redeployment of U2 spy aircraft, combat

engineer units, road-clearance teams and helicopters from Iraq to the burgeoning war in Afghanistan.

Underscoring again the fraudulent character of the "war against terrorism", an unnamed official told the *Los Angeles Times*: "We might still be too focused on Bin Laden. We should probably reassess our priorities."

McChrystal himself declared in a recent interview: "I don't think there is enough focus on counter-insurgency. I am not in a position to criticise counter-terrorism, but at this point in the war, in Afghanistan, it is most important to focus on almost classic counter-insurgency."

Far from being against terrorism, the war is against the Afghan people. The consequence of the rising death toll among both civilians and insurgents will be wider hostility toward the occupation forces and greater sympathy for the armed resistance to their presence.

At the same time, the surge is leading to a rise in US and NATO casualties. In July, foreign occupation forces in Afghanistan suffered their worst casualties of nearly eight years of war, with 75 losing their lives. In just the first two days of August, nine US and NATO troops have been killed—a rate as high as the worst days of fighting in Iraq.

The UNAMA report predicted that a sharp upsurge in violence would take place over the next several weeks, as the Obama administration and its allies attempted to hold a stage-managed presidential election in the country—including in areas controlled by the Taliban, where Afghan President Hamid Karzai is viewed with contempt.



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