

# UN: Record number of Afghan civilian deaths in 2009

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28 September 2009

The United Nations mission in Afghanistan recorded about 1,500 civilian deaths in the first six months of 2009, a 24 percent increase over the previous year and a record in the eight-year-old war.

August witnessed the most civilian killings, largely due to violence associated with that month's elections, the report said. It provided no figure for the August death toll.

The report—the Mid-Year Bulletin on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Afghanistan—only tallies recorded deaths. It therefore likely underestimates the number of civilian deaths caused by the war, many of which go unreported.

The UN report said that most civilian deaths are caused by NATO air strikes, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombings.

The study notes that NATO attacks “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 UN counted 80 different air strikes that resulted in 200 civilian casualties.

The report blames “both anti-government elements” and “pro-government forces” for the spike in civilian casualties. Insurgents caused 59 percent of recorded deaths, while Afghan and NATO security forces caused 30.5 percent, the UN says.

Ultimately, however, all violence in the war is the responsibility of the US and its allies, who invaded Afghanistan in late 2001 under the false pretext that the nation was responsible for the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

The increase in both civilian and US and coalition military casualties—which have also set a record this year—is the direct result of the “surge” in occupation

soldiers President Barack Obama ordered after his inauguration.

Obama ordered an increase of 21,000 soldiers in February, deployments which are to be completed by year's end. He is now discussing yet another increase.

A spate of casualties on Saturday and Sunday substantiated the UN report's findings.

On Saturday, a NATO air strike in Wardak province, adjacent to Kabul, killed three Afghan civilians, the provincial governor reported, while three Afghan civilians died when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb in Farah province.

Also Saturday, a suicide car bombing targeting Afghanistan's energy minister, Ismail Khan, killed four more civilians. Over 100 assassination attempts have been made on Afghan officials so far this year, the Associated Press reports, of which half were successful.

Six more occupation soldiers died on Saturday and Sunday, including three Frenchmen, two Americans, and a Briton. The French soldiers were killed Saturday by a violent storm in the northeast. One was killed in a lightning strike, and two were swept away in a flooded river. In the south on Saturday, a US soldier died when his vehicle hit a roadside bomb, and another died in an insurgent attack.

The White House, the Pentagon, and the military brass are currently debating a new round of troop increases.

General Stanley McChrystal, top NATO and US commander for the Af-Pak theater, has reportedly submitted a request to the Pentagon for a rapid troop increase of between 30,000 and 40,000, which could bring the total US contingent to over 100,000 soldiers.

McChrystal made the request in spite of the White House and Pentagon asking him to delay it while ongoing policy review discussion take place.

In an interview Sunday on CBS's 60 Minutes news program, McChrystal all but denounced the Pentagon, whose head is Defense Secretary Robert Gates, originally a Bush appointee.

"The secretary talks in terms of 12 to 18 months to show a significant change and then we eat up two or three months just on sort of getting the tools out of the tool box," McChrystal said. "That really hurts."

McChrystal has the support of Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mike Mullen and General David Petraeus, who oversaw the surge in Iraq that Washington credits for the temporary subsiding of US casualties there over the past year. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also reputedly supports McChrystal's proposals.

Army chief of staff General George W. Casey Jr., has reportedly expressed reservations, and former general and Secretary of State Colin Powell has advised Obama against a large surge without "a clearly defined mission."

Vice President Biden has argued in favor of relying more heavily on aerial bombardment and shifting focus further to Pakistan.

National Security Advisor James L. Jones, a retired general, said that Obama is in intense discussions with the National Security Council over developing a new strategy.

"Tuesday marks the start of five scheduled intensive discussions with the National Security Council, as well as field commanders and regional ambassadors, on Afghanistan," Jones said.

Jones told the *Washington Post* that what is holding the administration back from making a decision on increasing troops is uncertainty over how to confront the debacle resulting from the August 20 national elections in Afghanistan.

Obama wants "to make sure this comes out as a legitimate election," Jones said. "It is hard to predict whether the results will be that Karzai will be declared a winner or there will be a runoff... We don't know how it's going to turn out."

In other words, the Obama administration has not yet determined whether or not Karzai should be removed.

Speaking on CNN's State of the Union, Sec. Gates indicated that moves toward sidelining Karzai have been slowed.

"I don't think it's up to us to tell the Afghans how to organize their government. The reality is that you still

have an election process playing out," Gates said. "But I think, above all, what's important is whether or not the government of Afghanistan has legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghans. All information that we have available to us today indicates that continues to be the case."



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