Compensation paid by British military for Afghan deaths trebled in 2009

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The UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) paid compensation to relatives of at least 105 Afghans "killed in error" by British forces last year, three times more than in 2008. In 2009, 230 claims were considered altogether, most of which were refused. In 2008, 151 claims were made, according to the recently released figures.

The figures were released to *Channel 4 News* on June 24 through a Freedom of Information Act request.

The MoD issued a standard statement saying that "any incident involving civilian casualties is a matter of deep regret, particularly when the actions of international forces may be at fault."

The military then claimed that "payments are made to recognise the circumstances of each incident and to satisfy cultural and operational circumstances; they do not necessarily mean UK forces are legally liable."

Details of the incidents and the exact number of people who died are not always provided in the documents, which in a number of cases refer simply to "fatalities." Among the more detailed documents reported on by *Channel 4 News*, one showed that $875 (£584) was paid out last year to the family of a nine-year-old girl who was shot in the head.

In another documented incident, eight people were killed in December, including four relatives of Sufi Abdullah from Babaji, in southern Helmand Province. Sufi told the news channel that he, his two sons and two brothers had been sitting by a river. Just moments after he left the group a rocket struck.

"When I turned I saw that my son and brother were lying on the ground, unconscious and covered in blood," he said.

The *Channel 4 News* correspondent, Nick Patton Walsh, suggested that these figures could represent "just the tip of an iceberg" in terms of cases, as these families are "the ones who've navigated both the anarchy of Helmand and the bureaucracy of the British military system to get some kind of pay-out."

After almost nine years, there exists no comprehensive data on the number of deaths, injuries and disfigurement suffered by civilians as a result of the violence unleashed across Afghanistan by the US-led invasion and occupation. All figures of civilian casualties and fatalities cited by coalition forces, the puppet-regime in Kabul, as well as the United Nations and the media cannot be credited other than as the lowest possible estimate.

However, even a recent UN report showed an increase from 2,118 civilian deaths in 2008 to 2,412 deaths in 2009—the deadliest year of the occupation to that point. But according to the UK based charity Oxfam, around 5,000 Afghans have been killed in occupation-related violence over the past 12 months.

Ashley Jackson of the charity's Kabul office told *Channel 4 News* that all aspects of life in the country are being badly affected: "There is a rising tide of violence in Afghanistan and no one knows what anyone else is doing.... Local people say the situation is the worst it's been for 40 years."

In addition to direct fatalities resulting from military actions by coalition forces and anti-occupation insurgents, any accurate estimate of the real cost in Afghan lives must include the indirect consequences of the war: the deaths of possibly tens of thousands of Afghan civilians indirectly resulting from displacement, starvation, disease, exposure, lack of medical treatment and aid, as well as increased levels of crime and lawlessness resulting from the occupation.

The invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, was accompanied by an initial aerial bombardment of the country that resulted in the deaths of as yet uncounted

Afghan civilians. The Project on Defense Alternatives has estimated that in the three-month period between October 7, 2001, and January 1, 2002, at least 1,000-1,300 civilians were directly killed by the US-led aerial bombing campaign and that by mid-January 2002, at least 3,200 more Afghans had died of "starvation, exposure, associated illnesses, or injury sustained while in flight from war zones" as a result of the US-led offensive.

The *Los Angeles Times* found that in a five-month period from October 7, 2001, to February 28, 2002, there were between 1,067 and 1,201 civilian deaths from the bombing campaign reported in US, British, and Pakistani newspapers and international wire services. A 2002 analysis by the *Guardian* newspaper estimated that as many as 20,000 Afghans died in 2001 as an indirect result of the initial US airstrikes and ground invasion, many perishing from hunger and exposure to cold at the numerous refugee camps, struggling to cope with the 40 percent drop in aid deliveries as a result of air strikes.

According to figures compiled from various sources, research by Professor Marc W. Herold of the University of New Hampshire and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, has calculated that the death toll among Afghan civilians could be as high as 33,000. This too is most likely a considerable underestimation.