

UN report reveals sharp spike in Afghan civilian casualties

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Afghan civilians suffered a 31 percent increase in casualties during the first half of this year, according to a United Nations report released on Tuesday. While the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan blamed anti-occupation forces for the bulk of the killing and maiming, the spike coincides with Obama's military "surge," which has deployed an additional 30,000 combat troops in the country.

According to the report, there were 3,268 civilian casualties during the previous six months, with 1,271 killed and 1,997 wounded, "most of them severely."

The UN mission blamed 2,477 of these civilian casualties on so-called AGEs, or anti-government elements, which include the Taliban as well as other forces resisting foreign occupation and the corrupt US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai. It attributed 386 of these casualties to "pro-government forces [PGF]," which includes the US military and other foreign troops as well as Afghan security forces. It added that for 10 percent of the casualties, it was not possible to determine who was responsible.

The report attributed the rise in casualties allegedly caused by Afghan resistance forces to a marked increase in the assassination of government officials and others seen as collaborating with the occupation, which the UN said had reached a level of 18 a day in May. In addition, there has been, according to the report, a substantial increase in casualties resulting from IEDs (improvised explosive devices). These roadside bombs, aimed against foreign troop convoys, not infrequently are set off by civilians. The report blamed these bombs for the deaths of 557 civilians and the wounding of 1,137 more.

In presenting the report, Staffan de Mistura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, began by stressing that "this is a delicate issue and it is a delicate timing" for releasing the six-month report.

The clear implication was that the report is being made public in the midst of an international propaganda campaign mounted by the Obama administration with the aim of stemming the growth of antiwar sentiments in both the US and Europe. Washington, with the full collaboration of the

corporate media, is working systematically to portray the forces fighting against the US-led occupation as criminal violators of human rights and to paint the US military as defending the Afghan people. This campaign has reached a crescendo with the killing of 10 medical aid workers last Friday in northeastern Badakhshan province.

The outlines of this propaganda report were presented in a confidential CIA document drafted last March that was part of the trove of secret material made public by WikiLeaks. It warned that European unease with the Afghan war could be transformed into "active and potent hostility," given an increase in both NATO troops and Afghan civilian casualties resulting from the Obama surge, turning "passive opposition into active calls for immediate withdrawal." To counter this tendency, the report urged a "strategic communication program"; i.e., a propaganda campaign, centering on civilian casualties caused by the Taliban and the defense of women's rights.

The UN report clearly is being fed into that campaign, the concerns about the mission's head over the "delicacy" of the matter notwithstanding. The bias of the UN officials was unmistakable at a press conference in Kabul, where De Mistura lectured the anti-occupation forces that "if they want to be a part of a future Afghanistan, they cannot do so over the bodies of so many Afghan civilians."

In the same breath, the UN representative appealed to the US-led occupation forces to "increase substantially their care in avoiding civilian casualties, because we believe that everyone has come to this country to protect civilians." The message was clear, the US military has occupied Afghanistan to "protect civilians," while those opposing foreign occupation are bent on killing them. It would be hard to devise a more direct justification of colonialism and imperialist aggression.

Several Afghan reporters at the press conference expressed unconcealed frustration with this approach, pointing to recent crimes by the US military. One countered the UN representative, stating: "There have been a number of incidents such as recently in Helmand, Nangarhar and

Baghlan, where international forces have caused many civilian casualties and in some cases in order to keep their own security they have shot people to death on the roads. Your action has been only to condemn these kind of incidents and to warn them not to repeat the incidents. What does the United Nations do with regard to the arrest and trial of these people?"

De Mistura replied by telling his questioner to "please read the report," and the press conference was quickly ended.

Among the incidents referred to by the Afghan reporter were a rocket attack on a home in the Sangin district of Helmand Province at end of last month and air strikes in Nangarhar Province on August 5.

In the first attack, carried out by US forces, residents reported 52 civilians killed, a figure corroborated by local officials. The Karzai government sent investigators to the scene of the incident, who concluded that 39 civilians were killed in the rocket strike. For weeks, US and NATO officials denied that there had been any such incident.

Last week an unnamed "senior intelligence official for international forces" admitted to just six civilian casualties, together with eight Taliban fighters killed, while praising the Marines for their restraint.

Meanwhile, the Brave New Foundation's Rethink Afghanistan campaign posted interviews with local villagers who described how they had fled fighting between the Taliban and US troops, gathering women, children and the elderly into a house that they thought would provide sanctuary, which was then subjected to bombardment.

One of the villagers said 11 members of his family were killed, another counted nine from his. Mohamed Ahmadzai, a survivor of the attack, said that his wife, two of his daughters and his sister were killed, along with five other relatives.

"We gathered all of the body parts, some were missing legs or heads, we placed them in a bag and buried them," he said in recounting the aftermath of the bombing. "We were able to identify them through the clothes they were wearing and by their shoes. The body parts we couldn't identify we put into a piece of cloth and then buried them. Those chunks of flesh, blood and bone were from so many people, not just one, but we couldn't identify them, so we put those body parts into an individual grave and buried them as though they belonged to one person."

Asked to explain the wild divergence between the NATO body count and the report from the villagers, the unnamed intelligence official quoted by the *Times* said, "coalition forces were unable to visit the scene because the Taliban controlled the area."

In the second round of attacks last Thursday, in Nangarhar, NATO has acknowledged between four and a dozen

civilians deaths. Afghans have reported scores killed in a pair of NATO air strikes. One hit an Afghan funeral procession, killing 28 people including two children. The second inflicted at least 30 casualties counting dead and wounded Afghan civilians.

The UN report does include references to some of the more infamous atrocities carried out by US and other foreign troops in Afghanistan. These include a raid on a home by US Special Forces troops last February 12 in which there was a massacre of a group of people gathered for a family celebration. Five civilians, including three women, two of them pregnant, were killed, and four others were wounded, including a 15 year old boy. It also refers to the February 21 Predator drone attack on a three-vehicle convoy carrying civilian men, women and children, displaced by the fighting, back to their village. Twenty-one people died in the attack, and 14 others were wounded.

There is no detailed breakdown of the deaths and injuries attributed to US forces during the first half of 2010, the majority of them resulting from air strikes and night raids. So there is no way of determining the validity of the UN figures. While the report claims that the numbers are based on a "broad range of sources," it acknowledges that where the "non-combatant status" of victims is in doubt, they are not counted as civilian casualties. Given the US military's standard operating procedure of denying civilian casualties until they are proven liars, and the routine classification of all those killed as "Taliban," this would obviously leave many of the victims uncounted.

Washington will undoubtedly seize on the UN report as grist for its war propaganda. It will likely have little effect, however, particularly within Afghanistan, where broad layers of the population attribute all the violence, whether caused immediately by occupation forces or the resistance, to the presence of 150,000 foreign troops on Afghan soil.



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