

Ben Arnoldy, *Afghanistan war: UN report blames insurgents for rise in civilian deaths, 10 October 2010*

According to a new UN report, the Taliban and other insurgents are largely responsible for the recent surge in civilian deaths, not coalition forces. Gen. David Petraeus has ordered a related PR offensive.



Afghanistan war: Afghan police officers and local residents stand near a house which was targeted by militants in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Tuesday. Civilian casualties have surged over the past six months in Afghanistan. According to a new UN report, it's the insurgents who are mostly responsible, not the coalition. Musadeq Sadeq/AP

New Delhi: Civilian casualties have surged over the past six months in Afghanistan. According to a new report from the United Nations, it's the insurgents who are mostly responsible, not the coalition. Gen. David Petraeus has directed NATO to take advantage of this with a new public relations offensive in an effort to win the public relations war.

According to the UN, the number of civilians killed in the conflict in the first half of this year numbered 1,271, more than a 20 percent jump over the same period last year. Under stricter rules of engagement, coalition forces reduced civilian killings by 29 percent, while insurgents killed 48 percent more civilians than at the same time last year. Overall, insurgents were responsible for 72 percent of this year's civilian deaths.

NATO's tighter rules of engagement have resulted in grumbling in the ranks, but Petraeus hasn't changed the rules much since he took command in July. Instead, he is pushing his public affairs officers to reap greater benefits from the Taliban's increasingly poor record on killing innocents.

"He has made it very clear from the beginning that it's his intent to hold the Taliban accountable for what they are doing – and to announce what they are doing," says Lt. Col. John Dorrian, the public affairs team chief for international coalition forces.

Beginning in July, Dorrian's team started sending out more press releases detailing Taliban atrocities. That resulted in 231 press releases that made it to the e-mail inboxes of journalists in July, compared with 130 in June. More releases are also being translated into Afghan languages in the hopes of having more influence on Afghan press coverage of the war.

Dorrian says that within Afghanistan, the coalition was "probably" losing the PR war. By not publicizing attacks committed by the Taliban, the militants would sometimes blame the coalition first, he says.

The Taliban's weakness

The raw material for war propaganda appears to favor the coalition – not just in comparative data from sources like the UN, but in ability to gather information and broadcast it.

"We know the Taliban will be unable to match the level of detail with which we can report in this country. They do not have freedom of movement," says Dorrian. "This is an enemy weakness that will continue to get weaker, and we will continue to make sure that people are aware of what the Taliban are doing."

Both sides of the conflict have taken serious hits recently over civilian casualties. The Wikileaks release of classified material from 2009 and earlier revealed a number of civilian casualties caused by the coalition that had gone unreported. (A UN spokesman says his agency's data do not rely on military reporting but a variety of sources, though it is a reminder that killings do go unnoticed in these data sets.)

And then there's the medical aid worker killings

The Taliban, meanwhile, face a PR debacle over Thursday's massacre of 10 medical aid workers – a crime claimed by the Taliban. In another case, Afghan police say the Taliban beat and executed a pregnant widow Sunday for alleged adultery – a charge the Taliban denies.

When it comes to civilian casualties in the fog of war, analysts have pointed out that the coalition pays a far steeper price for each killing than does the Taliban. When the coalition kills a civilian, more Afghans are alienated from the government. When the Taliban kill a civilian, Afghans also get angry at the government's inability to protect them.

Taliban leaders have issued two codes of conducts in as many years, each time urging followers to avoid civilian casualties. The initial code was released just prior to the UN casualty reporting – as was this year's update. The 2010 UN data indicate that Taliban fighters ignored the initial directives to minimize civilian casualties.

It's not clear if the codes are understood to be propaganda only, or if the Taliban leadership simply does not have such sway over fighters in the field.

The coalition released what they claim to be an intercepted message from Taliban leader Mullah Omar in which he calls for the killing of any Afghan supporting or working for coalition forces.

Dorrian says that, anecdotally, there appears to be an increase of coverage in the Afghan press of Taliban civilian killings, in part because of the coalition's new strategy: "You are starting to see a higher level of criticism of the Taliban, and that has effect."

Rod Nordland, "U.N. blames insurgents for rising share of Afghan civilian deaths,"
New York Times, 11 August 2010, p. A8.

KABUL, Afghanistan — The number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan continued to climb in the first half of 2010, with an increasing number of children in the toll and a spike in the recently troubled northeast. More than ever, the deaths were caused by insurgents, the United Nations said in a report released Tuesday.

In its midyear report, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, known as Unama, said the number of civilians wounded and killed increased by nearly a third in the first six months of the year, as coalition forces raised the level of military action against insurgents.

In that period, 1,271 civilians were killed and 1,997 were wounded, the report said, with more than three-quarters attributable to what it called “antigovernment elements.”

Death and injury to children were up 55 percent, with 176 killed and 389 wounded, the report said, noting that improvised bombs were often placed in areas frequented by the young, like parks and markets.

The single biggest cause of the increase in civilian casualties was insurgent bombings, including both suicide bombings and homemade bombs, which the military calls improvised explosive devices. Together they caused 557 deaths.

“This is a wake-up call for us,” the top United Nations official in Kabul, Staffan de Mistura, said at a news conference. “By looking at the figures, we suddenly have a trend of increase which we have the duty to raise publicly, in particularly with those who are causing these deaths.”

Since 2009, when the United States military made it a high priority to reduce civilian casualties, the trend has been for a far lower percentage of them to be caused by the military, and far more by the Taliban and other insurgents.

In 2007, less than half of the civilian casualties were caused by the insurgents, according to United Nations statistics. The new figure, an increase of 53 percent over the same period last year, was the most significant change to date.

“Nine years into the conflict, measures to protect Afghan civilians effectively and to minimize the impact of the conflict on basic human rights are more urgent than ever,” said Georgette Gagnon, human rights director for Unama.

Mr. de Mistura, the ranking United Nations official in Afghanistan, had harsh criticism for the insurgents’ conduct, noting their widespread and increased use of indiscriminate weapons like roadside bombs in civilian areas, and their tendency to fight from civilian cover.

“People who are part of this conflict should not be using human shields, should not be fighting from where civilians are,” he said.

Over all, civilian casualties caused by government or coalition forces declined by 30 percent for the period. Deaths of civilians from NATO aerial bombings, once the leading cause of such casualties, were down 64 percent over the same period in 2009, for a total of 69 civilian deaths, the United Nations said.

The report ascribed the decrease to an order in July 2009 from Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the United States commander at the time, which greatly limited the use of airstrikes where there was a risk of civilian casualties.

The overall 31 percent increase in civilian casualties was also attributable to an increase in military operations, particularly in southern and southeastern Afghanistan, the

report said, as larger numbers of NATO forces have poured into the country and military operations have increased.

In the northeastern part of the country, until recently relatively quiet, the increase in civilian deaths in the first half of the year was 136 percent over the same period in 2009.

The report also noted an increased use of intimidation and assassination of the civilian population by the Taliban, singling out anyone “perceived to be” connected with the government or international forces.

In 2009, such assassinations averaged 3.6 per week, increasing to 7 per week in the first four months of 2010, then increasing to 18 per week in May and June of 2010, the report said.

A statement on Tuesday from NATO’s international force welcomed the report’s findings, but added a comment from the new commander, Gen. David H. Petraeus, taken from his recent tactical directive to coalition soldiers.

“Every Afghan death diminishes our cause,” General Petraeus said. “While we have made progress in our efforts to reduce coalition-caused civilian casualties, we know the measure by which our mission will be judged is protecting the population from harm by either side.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 10, 2010

An earlier version of this article misstated the year in which casualties among Afghan children increased. It is 2010, not 2009.