



Afghanistan – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 21 February 2018

The on-going fighting in Afghanistan and the prevalence bombings, including suicide attacks and kidnappings

The Executive Summary of a report published by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) states:

“Civilians continued to suffer the effects of armed conflict in Afghanistan throughout 2017. Between 1 January and 31 December, UNAMA documented 10,453 civilian casualties (3,438 deaths and 7,015 injured), an overall decrease of nine per cent compared to 2016 and the first year-on-year decrease recorded by UNAMA since 2012. While the number of civilian deaths reduced by two per cent from 2016 and the number of civilians injured decreased by 11 per cent, the overall continuation of high numbers of civilian casualties underscores the enormous human cost of the ongoing armed conflict. Between 1 January 2009 and 31 December 2017, the armed conflict in Afghanistan claimed the lives of 28,291 civilians and injured 52,366 others.

The nine per cent decrease in civilian casualties in 2017 mainly resulted from less harm to civilians caused by ground fighting compared to 2016, while civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks continued to rise. Such attacks caused 22 per cent of all civilian casualties in Afghanistan in 2017, with 16 per cent of all civilian casualties during the year occurring from such attacks in Kabul city. Civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks countrywide increased by 17 per cent compared to 2016 – as a result, 2017 recorded the highest number of civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks in a single year in Afghanistan since the mission began systematic documentation of civilian casualties in 2009.” (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) (February 2018) *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2017*, pp.1-2)

In a section titled “Tactics and Incident Types Causing Most Harm to Civilians” (sub-section headed “Suicide and Complex Attacks”) this report states:

“In 2017, civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks comprised 22 per cent of all civilian casualties, and the second leading cause of any single tactic or incident type, after ground engagements. UNAMA documents 57 suicide and complex attacks that caused 2,295 civilian casualties (605 deaths and 1,690 injured). This represents a 17 per cent increase from 2016 and the highest number of civilian casualties from such attacks in a single year since UNAMA began documenting civilian casualties in 2009. Following a trend first observed in the first six months of 2017, suicide and complex attacks remained the leading cause of civilian casualties attributed to Anti-Government Elements.

UNAMA notes that 1,520 civilian casualties (428 deaths and 1,092 injured) from suicide and complex attacks came from those targeting civilians or civilian objects, mostly attributed to undetermined Anti-Government Elements and *Daesh*/ISIL-KP. This included attacks against civilian government premises and employees, places of worship, health facilities and judiciary buildings and officials. UNAMA also notes that sectarian-motivated suicide and complex attacks against civilian targets, including places of worship, continued to cause extreme harm, mainly in Kabul. Nearly all these attacks were claimed by *Daesh*/ISIL-KP. For the first time, UNAMA also recorded attacks claimed by the group outside of Nangarhar or Kabul, in Herat province.” (ibid, pp.28-29)

A section of this report headed “Conflict-Related Abduction of Civilians” states:

“Conflict-related abductions involve the forcible taking and holding of a civilian or civilians by a party to the conflict in order to compel the victim or a third party to take or refrain from taking an action. Anti-Government Elements kidnapped civilians based on suspicions that they had connections to or worked for the Government, but also for financial gain, with release predicated on payment of a substantial ransom. Throughout 2017, UNAMA continued to record the abduction of civilians by Anti-Government Elements, documenting 255 incidents involving the abduction of 1,005 civilians and resulting in the death of 76 and injury to 17.” (ibid, p.34)

This section of the report also states:

“Victims of abduction by Anti-Government Elements in 2017 continued to comprise a wide range of civilians including Government workers and their family members, off-duty and former Afghan National Police officers, civilians perceived as opposing Anti-Government Element values, relatives of Afghan national security forces, and civilians deemed spies for the Government.

Anti-Government Elements also abducted civilians and held them hostage for the purpose of warning against unacceptable behaviour. On 18 July, Taliban abducted 68 civilians in Shah Wali Kot district, Kandahar province, after clashes with ANP in the area the previous day. Taliban threatened residents of two surrounding villages, warning that the residents must move from the area in order to secure the release of their abducted family members and neighbours. Taliban released 30 of the victims after several days, after which Taliban held the remaining abductees for more than two months before releasing them in two groups – one in mid-September and one at the end of September.” (ibid, p.35)

A report from the independent Afghan news agency Pajhwok Afghan News states:

“Taliban militants closed the Farah-Herat highway and abducted five passengers, an official said on Tuesday. Shehla Abu Bakar, a Farah provincial council member, told Pajhwok Afghan News the insurgents blocked highway in Shamalgah area on the outskirts of Farah City for some hours. She accused the Taliban of kidnapping five individuals, who were possibly university students. The captives did not belong to Farah province, she said, believing the kidnap victims might have been shifted to Khak-i-Safid district.”

(Pajhwok Afghan News (16 January 2018) *Taliban kidnap 5 passengers on Farah-Heart highway*)

A report from the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle states:

“There have been seven major attacks around the city this year, and the abduction industry is booming. Recently, an Afghan guard and a German relief worker were killed in what appears to have been a failed kidnapping. A bombing at the start of May killed eight civilians. The relentless violence defies the city's widespread security apparatus.” (Deutsche Welle (25 May 2017) *The Afghan security problem*)

In a paragraph headed “Unemployment and discord” this report states:

“Afghanistan is in turmoil, and civilians keep getting killed - nearly 11,500 dead or wounded last year, according to the United Nations. Of the country's 34 provinces, 31 are under attack. In the first four months of 2017, 90,000 Afghans became internally displaced, adding to the 600,000 in 2016. The situation has further deteriorated this year since Iran and Pakistan have deported up to 200,000 refugees. Many find themselves in Kabul, which the city is unable to cope with.” (ibid)

A BBC News report states:

“Taliban fighters, whom US-led forces spent billions of dollars trying to defeat, are now openly active in 70% of Afghanistan, a BBC study has found. Months of research across the country shows that the Taliban now control or threaten much more territory than when foreign combat troops left in 2014. The Afghan government played down the report, saying it controls most areas. But recent attacks claimed by Taliban and Islamic State group militants have killed scores in Kabul and elsewhere.” (BBC News (31 January 2018) *Taliban threaten 70% of Afghanistan, BBC finds*)

A report from the Afghanistan Analysts Network, in a response to the question “What happened and who claimed responsibility?”, states:

“The current wave of attacks represents a new peak of the urban terrorist campaign carried out by the Taleban and by local IS-affiliated groups. Since 28 December 2017, there have been eight attacks in three major cities, Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar.

The list of the attacks in major urban areas:

- On 28 December 41, mainly young, Shia civilians were killed by a suicide bomber among the audience at a Shia education centre Tote in West Kabul. The attack was claimed by the local branch of the Islamic State (IS), its ‘Khorasan province’ (ISKP), through an IS centre-related news channel.
- On 31 December, 18 people were killed by a bombing at a politician’s funeral in Jalalabad. There were conflicting reports as to whether a suicide bomber or a motorcycle bomb caused the explosion. The Taleban denied their involvement, an ISKP claim was reported.

- On 4 January, 11 people, mostly police personnel, were killed by a suicide bomber during a protest involving shopkeepers in eastern Kabul, Jalalabad Road. ISKP claimed responsibility (see here.)
- On 20 January, 40 people were killed by armed gunmen who stormed Kabul Continental Hotel. Those killed included mainly government IT specialists, crew members of a private Afghan airline and other Afghan and international hotel guests. This is the only attack where all the victims were not Afghan. 15 of those who died and several of those injured were foreigners. The Taleban claimed responsibility.
- On 23 January, five people were killed when armed attackers stormed the Save The Children office in Jalalabad. The attack was claimed by ISKP.
- On 27 January, four people – two police and two civilians – were killed during a suicide attack in Kandahar City, near the Aino Mena housing scheme, when a suicide bomber struck a police vehicle. The Taleban claimed the attack.
- On 27 January, 103 people were killed when a car bomb exploded in Kabul's Sedarat Square. This attack was claimed by the Taleban.
- On 29 January, 11 soldiers were killed when gunmen stormed a base of the Afghan National Army's 111th division in Kabul. Again, ISKP claimed responsibility for it." (Afghanistan Analysts Network (5 February 2018) *Five Questions to Make Sense of the New Peak in Urban Attacks and a Violent Week in Kabul*)

This report also states:

"High-profile attacks in urban areas tend to overshadow ongoing fighting in provinces. However, there has also been simultaneous fighting in a number of provinces outside Kabul over this period. On the days of the biggest attacks alone, 20 and 27 January, media and other reports registered fighting and other security incidents in seven other provinces." (ibid)

An article from UK newspaper The Times states:

"Islamic State claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb attack that killed at least 41 people and wounded more than 90 in Kabul yesterday, underlining the resilience of the Islamist group in the face of a military offensive by Afghan and Nato forces.

The attack against students who were arriving at a compound in the west of the city housing the Afghan Voice news agency and a Shia Islamic cultural centre. Witnesses reported blasts at the entrance to the compound before a suicide bomber blew himself up inside the cultural centre, where locals had gathered on the anniversary of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Images published online showed bodies strewn across the ground at the entrance to the compound. Inside the centre there was devastation, with blood and body parts spattered up the walls. As hospitals near the blast site struggled to cope with the scores of wounded, doctors said that the final tally

was likely to rise overnight.” (The Times (29 December 2017) *Dozens murdered in Kabul bombing by resurgent Isis*)

A BBC News report on this incident states:

“The main blast went off inside the Tabayan cultural centre, but offices of Afghan Voice are also at the location of the attack. Students were among those who had gathered at the Shia centre for a discussion forum. The interior ministry said the event was to mark the 38th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The initial explosion was followed by at least two others, although the ministry said these did not cause any fatalities. The health ministry’s latest figures say 41 people died and 84 were hurt, with women and children among the casualties.” (BBC News (28 December 2017) *Afghanistan suicide bomb attack: Dozens killed in Kabul*)

A document published by the Institute for War & Peace Reporting refers to recent violence in Afghanistan as follows:

“The recent wave of violence began on January 20 when Taliban gunmen stormed the Inter-Continental situated on the outskirts of Kabul.

Insurgents shot dead 21 civilians including 14 foreign nationals, as well as injuring 17 others. The attack, which lasted around 17 hours, also effectively grounded a national airline carrier as key staff were staying at the hotel.

Kam Air officials believe the Taliban gunmen had prior intelligence on where its staff were staying and sought to target those rooms first. Nine airline personnel, including five pilots, died in the attack, which has left the company unable to operate dozens of flights.

Days after the Inter-Continental was hit, militants also stormed an office of the Save the Children aid agency in Nangarhar’s provincial capital, Jalalabad.

The complex assault began on January 24 when a car bomb was detonated outside the office. Gunmen then entered the compound, shooting dead four members of staff and wounding more than a dozen. Islamic State (IS) later claimed responsibility for the attack.

More than 105 people died and 210 were wounded in the next major attack on January 27 in Kabul, when a Taliban suicide bomber detonated an ambulance packed with explosives.

Two days later, militants attacked the country’s main military academy, in the west of the city, killing eight soldiers and wounding 13. This attack was also claimed by IS.” (Institute for War & Peace Reporting (7 February 2018) *Surge In Violence Hits Fragile Afghan Economy*)

A report from the International Crisis Group states:

“Over one week, as many as 130 people, the overwhelming majority civilians, were killed in twin attacks claimed by the Taliban in Kabul. On 20 January, five Taliban suicide bombers attacked the Intercontinental Hotel, killing at least 22 people, mostly foreigners, after breaching the security of the heavily guarded building. Almost half the dead were employees of Afghan airline

carrier, Kam Air. Families and friends of civilians trapped in the fourteen-hour siege spent the night in the sub-zero temperature outside the hotel waiting for news of their loved ones.

A week later the Taliban launched a deadlier attack, killing over 100 people, again mostly civilians. This attack, near an old interior ministry building, was carried out using an ambulance. Despite their reluctance to accept responsibility for such attacks in the past, the Taliban this time were quick to claim the attack, but denied civilians were killed. An International Committee of the Red Cross statement condemned the attack as 'senseless', noting that ambulances should be used 'for saving lives, not destroying them'.

A third suicide attack, this one claimed by the Islamic State's local branch, Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-KP) hit a military academy of the Afghan army on 29 January." (International Crisis Group (7 February 2018) *The Cost of Escalating Violence in Afghanistan*)

A report from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty states:

"Meanwhile, Interior Minister Wais Barmak said that the number of people killed in the massive suicide car bombing in a crowded area in central Kabul in the early afternoon of January 27 had risen to 103. Officials had earlier put the number at 95. He said that 235 other people were wounded, including more than 30 police officers. Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, claimed that the militant group was behind the attack, one of the biggest blasts to hit the war-torn city in recent years. Officials said the attacker used an ambulance to pass through the checkpoints and reach Sadarat Square, near many government buildings, foreign embassies, and shops. Eyewitnesses say that buildings hundreds of meters away were shaken by the force of the explosion." (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (28 January 2018) *Afghanistan Mourns More Than 100 Dead After Kabul Bombing*)

An article from The Economist states:

"Three murderous attacks in Kabul in little more than a week have thrust Afghanistan back into the headlines. They included the siege of a luxury hotel, a massive blast near a hospital caused by an explosive-laden vehicle painted to look like an ambulance and an assault on an army compound. More than 130 people have been killed and over 300 maimed. Equally horrifying was an attack in the city of Jalalabad on the offices of Save the Children, a British charity, in which six people died. The violence left Afghans wondering whether the Taliban and the local branch of Islamic State, which between them claimed responsibility for the attacks, are shifting their focus to urban terrorism—and why the security services seem so incapable of defending the country against it.

A comforting answer to the first question could be that the urban attacks reflect the increased pressure the Taliban have been under in rural areas since Donald Trump acquiesced to his generals' call for more troops and a fiercer air campaign. By staging attacks in big cities, it is suggested, the militants hope to get more attention than in a losing battle in the countryside.

In fact, there is little evidence that the insurgency is being pushed back. A report released by the Pentagon in October estimated that the government

had control over 57% of the country's 407 districts, while the Taliban controlled 13%, with the remainder contested. The Pentagon's latest figures are 56% and 14%—in other words, not much has changed. The reality is that the insurgency remains resilient, but its advance following the departure of many American troops at the end of 2014 has slowed.” (The Economist (3 February 2018) *A spate of attacks in the Afghan capital rattles the government; The Afghan conflict*)

A report from Al Jazeera states:

“A more aggressive US strategy in Afghanistan has put the Taliban on the back foot, soldiers and police say, but recent, bloody attacks in Kabul show the group remains potent and a prolonged stalemate looms. President Donald Trump in August unveiled a more hawkish military approach, including a surge in air attacks, aimed at forcing the Taliban to the negotiating table. While Afghan security forces say the effect has been significant, the Taliban are still mobile in huge swaths of the country and, with foreign troop levels at about 15,000 compared with 140,000 in 2014, there appears little hope of outright military victory. ‘The American air attacks have broken their back,’ said Nasrullah, a soldier in Kunar province on the Pakistani border. ‘They don't dare attack in large numbers because they know they'd all get killed. Without air support, we'd be struggling.’” (Al Jazeera (8 February 2018) *US bombers halt the Taliban with no victory in sight*)

An article from the New York Times states:

“After 16 years of war in Afghanistan, experts have stopped asking what victory looks like and are beginning to consider the spectrum of possible defeats. All options involve acknowledging the war as failed, American aims as largely unachievable and Afghanistan’s future as only partly salvageable. Their advocates see glimmers of hope barely worth the stomach-turning trade-offs and slim odds of success. ‘I don’t think there is any serious analyst of the situation in Afghanistan who believes that the war is winnable,’ Laurel Miller, a political scientist at the RAND Corporation, said in a podcast last summer, after leaving her State Department stint as acting special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. This may be why, even after thousands have died and over \$100 billion has been spent, even after the past two weeks of shocking bloodshed in Kabul, few expect the United States to try anything other than the status quo. It is a strategy, as Ms. Miller described it, to ‘prevent the defeat of the Afghan government and prevent military victory by the Taliban’ for as long as possible.” (New York Times (1 February 2018) *In Afghanistan’s Unwinnable War, What’s the Best Loss to Hope For?*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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