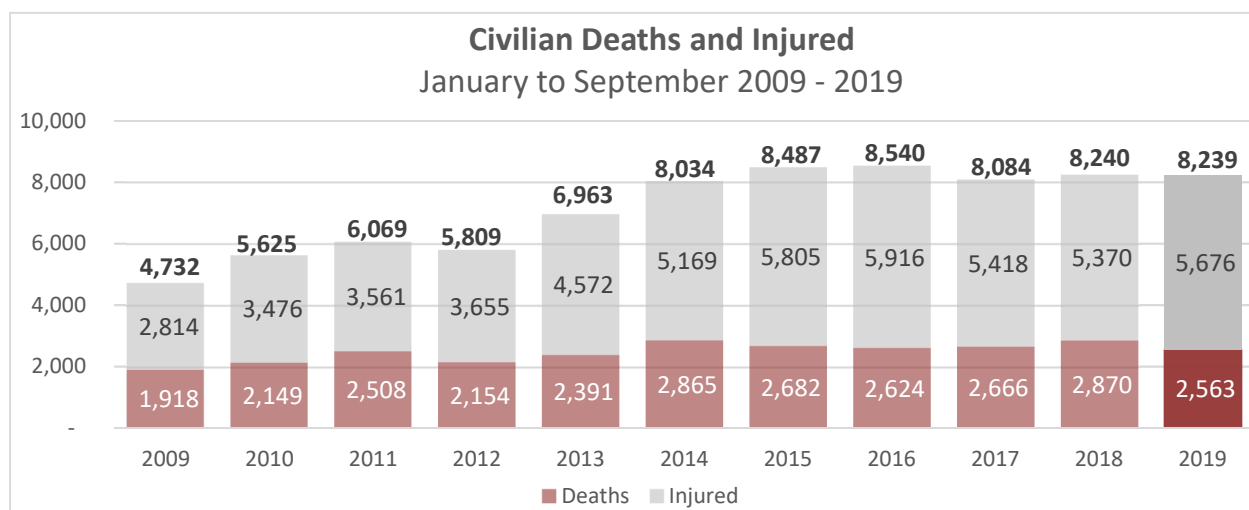




## QUARTERLY REPORT ON THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN ARMED CONFLICT: 1 JANUARY TO 30 SEPTEMBER 2019

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is gravely concerned about the unprecedented levels of violence harming civilians during the third quarter of 2019. From 1 July to 30 September 2019, UNAMA documented the highest number of civilian casualties that it has recorded in a single quarter since it began systematic documentation in 2009. While in the first half year of 2019 UNAMA documented a decrease in civilian casualties in comparison to previous year, in July, August and September extreme levels of violence brought the civilian casualty levels back to the unacceptable high levels of previous years. Furthermore, in the month of July, UNAMA documented the highest number of civilian casualties that the Mission has recorded in a single month. For the sixth year in a row, UNAMA has recorded more than 8,000 civilian casualties in the first nine months of the year, underlining that Afghans have been exposed to extreme levels of violence for many years, despite the statements of parties to the conflict to prevent and mitigate harm to civilians. UNAMA urges parties to redouble their efforts to protect civilians from harm.<sup>1</sup>

From 1 January to 30 September, UNAMA documented 8,239 civilian casualties (2,563 deaths and 5,676 injured), similar to the same period in 2018. Anti-Government Elements continued to cause the majority of civilian casualties in Afghanistan and also caused slightly more civilian deaths than Pro-Government Forces in the first nine months of 2019, contrary to the first half year of 2019 when Pro-Government Forces caused more civilian deaths. Forty-one per cent of all civilian casualties were women and children.<sup>2</sup> Civilians living in



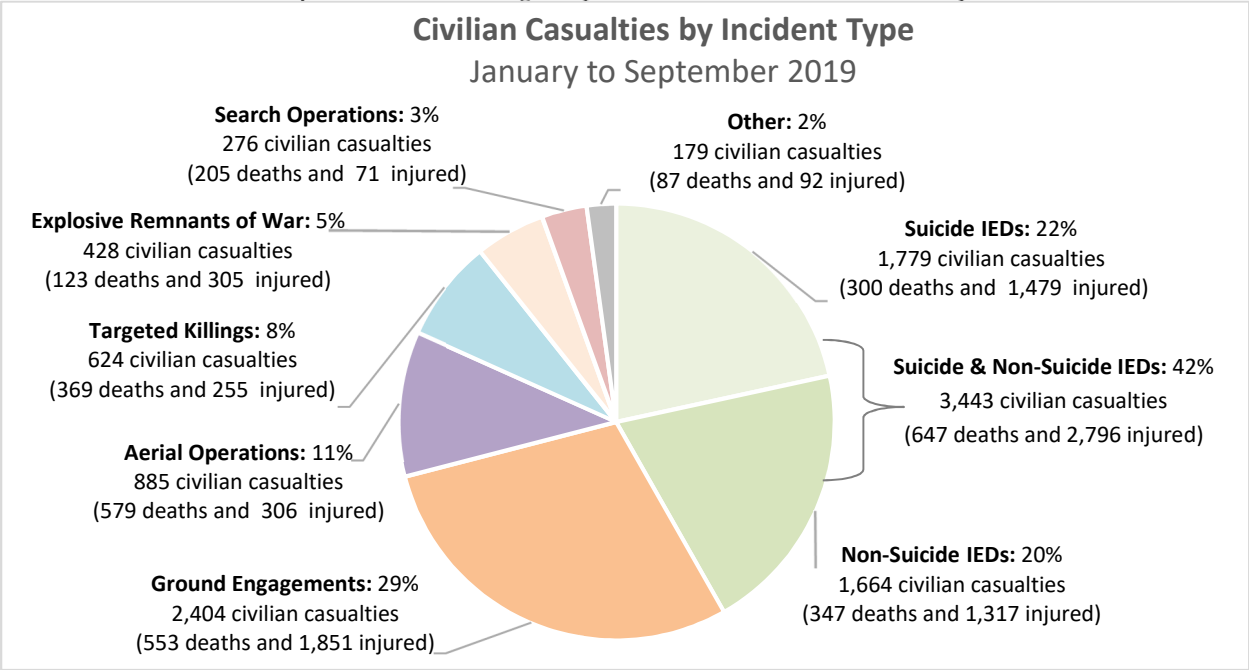
<sup>1</sup> For example see President Ghani's interview with Shamsad TV on 21 September 2019, starting at 59:10 minutes, accessible at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M\\_4uR6dBCus](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_4uR6dBCus).

<sup>2</sup> In the first nine months of 2019, UNAMA documented 923 women casualties (261 deaths and 662 injured) and 2,461 child casualties (631 deaths and 1,830 injured).

the provinces of Kabul, Nangarhar, Helmand, Ghazni, and Faryab were most directly impacted by the conflict (in that order).<sup>3</sup>

During the first nine months of 2019, the combined use of suicide<sup>4</sup> and non-suicide improvised explosive devices (IEDs) was the leading cause of civilian casualties causing 42 per cent of the overall total, up from 28 per cent after the first two quarters of 2019. Ground engagements was the second leading cause of civilian casualties (29 per cent), followed by aerial attacks (11 per cent). Aerial operations remained the leading incident type of civilian deaths, causing 23 per cent of civilian deaths.<sup>5</sup>

From 1 January to 30 September 2019, UNAMA recorded continued increases in civilian casualties from aerial operations and search operations, as well as an increase in civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war and non-suicide IEDs, as compared to the same time period in 2018. Although civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks decreased compared to 2018, the significant spike in violence from these incident types during the third quarter is notable. While civilian casualties from ground engagements were down by 15 per cent at the midyear point, UNAMA documented a significant increase of this incident type in the third quarter of 2019. This caused levels of civilian casualties from ground engagements from the first nine months of 2019 to reach similar levels to those from that incident type in the same time period of 2018. This is due in part to civilian casualties caused by indirect fire during the presidential election in the third quarter.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>3</sup> UNAMA documented the following civilian casualties in each of the respective provinces: Kabul (1,491), Nangarhar (824), Helmand (563), Ghazni (547), and Faryab (530).

<sup>4</sup> The incident type “Suicide IEDs” include “complex attacks”, which are defined by UNAMA as deliberate and coordinated attacks that include a suicide device, more than one attacker and more than one type of device. All three elements must be present for an attack to be considered ‘complex’. For more information on terminology, please see the glossary in the UNAMA 2018 Annual Protection of Civilians Report, available online at: <https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>.

<sup>5</sup> For comparison, during the first three quarters of 2018, aerial attacks caused 8 per cent of total civilian casualties and 12 per cent of civilian deaths. Noting that suicide and non-suicide IEDs are regarded as separate incident types.

<sup>6</sup> While civilian casualties from ground engagements slightly decreased in the first nine months of 2019 as compared to 2018, this was mainly due to a 48 per cent decrease in civilian casualties that UNAMA could not attribute to either Anti-

### Spike in violence during the third quarter

The third quarter of 2019 proved to be particularly turbulent, with civilians gravely affected by the escalation of violence. As talks between the United States and the Taliban progressed in Doha throughout July and August, violence causing civilian casualties soared. From 1 July to 30 September 2019, UNAMA documented 4,313 civilian casualties (1,174 deaths and 3,139 injured). This is the highest number of civilian casualties UNAMA has recorded in a single quarter since it began systematic documentation in 2009. Civilian casualty figures of this three month period saw a 42 per cent increase compared to the same time period in 2018.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, July witnessed the highest number of civilian casualties that UNAMA has ever recorded in a single month: 1,589 civilian casualties (425 deaths and 1,164 injured). The rise in civilian casualties during the third quarter was mainly due to a significant increase in civilian casualties from suicide and non-suicide IED attacks by Anti-Government Elements, primarily the Taliban.

### Anti-Government Elements

From 1 January to 30 September 2019, Anti-Government Elements caused 5,117 civilian casualties (1,207 deaths and 3,910 injured)<sup>8</sup>, accounting for 62 per cent of all civilian casualties. While this represents a three per cent overall decrease in civilian casualties attributed to Anti-Government Elements compared to the same period in 2018, the recent increase of civilian casualties attributed to Taliban is noteworthy. UNAMA attributed 3,823 civilian casualties (922 deaths and 2,901 injured) representing 46 per cent of all civilian casualties to the Taliban. Civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban increased by 31 per cent in the first nine months of 2019 as compared to the same time period in 2018.<sup>9</sup> However, comparing the months of July, August and September of 2019 to the third quarter of 2018, it shows more than a tripling of civilian casualties caused by the Taliban.<sup>10</sup> UNAMA attributed 1,013 civilian casualties (229 deaths and 784 injured) representing 12 per cent of all civilian casualties, to *Daesh*/Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). This is a 49 per cent decrease as compared to the first nine months of 2018.<sup>11</sup> Unidentified Anti-Government Elements caused 281 civilian casualties (56 deaths and 225 injured) three per cent of all civilian casualties.

The combined use of suicide and non-suicide IEDs was the leading cause of civilian casualties attributed to Anti-Government Elements, followed by ground engagements and targeted killings. UNAMA documented an increase in civilian casualties from non-suicide IEDs (27 per cent) and from ground engagements (18 per cent) that were attributed to Anti-Government Elements during the first nine months of 2019 in comparison to 2018. Notwithstanding the high civilian casualties resulting from suicide and complex attacks in the third quarter, civilian casualties from this incident type were down by 24 per cent overall for the first nine months of 2019. Civilian casualties from targeted killings perpetrated by Anti-Government Elements decreased by 12 per cent.

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Government Elements or Pro-Government Forces. Civilian casualties from ground engagements that UNAMA was able to attribute to either Pro-Government Forces or Anti-Government Elements actually increased in 2019 as compared to 2018 at the end of the third quarter.

<sup>7</sup> From 1 July to 30 September 2018, UNAMA documented 3,035 civilian casualties (1,141 deaths and 1,894 injured). Civilian casualties during the third quarter of 2019 (1 July – 30 September) more than doubled in comparison to the second quarter of 2019 (1 April – 30 June).

<sup>8</sup> This includes 497 women casualties (113 deaths and 384 injured) and 1,195 child casualties (206 deaths and 989 injured).

<sup>9</sup> In the first nine months of 2018, UNAMA attributed 2,912 civilian casualties (1,056 deaths, 1,856 injured) to the Taliban.

<sup>10</sup> In the third quarter of 2019, UNAMA attributed 2,322 civilian casualties (491 deaths and 1,831 injured) to the Taliban as compared to 737 civilian casualties (287 deaths and 450 injured) in the third quarter of 2018.

<sup>11</sup> In the first nine months of 2018, UNAMA attributed 1,985 civilian casualties (609 deaths and 1376 injured) to *Daesh*/ISKP.

### ***Indiscriminate suicide and non-suicide IED attacks***

UNAMA remains gravely concerned about the indiscriminate use of suicide and non-suicide IEDs in civilian areas. While from January to September UNAMA recorded a six per cent decrease from suicide and non-suicide IEDs in comparison to the year prior, during the months of July, August and September, UNAMA documented an alarming 72 per cent increase of civilian casualties from these two incident types in comparison to the same period in 2018.

UNAMA documented 1,779 civilian casualties (300 deaths and 1,479 injured) resulting from suicide IED attacks.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the first three quarters of 2018, when the vast majority of civilian casualties from suicide IED attacks were carried out by *Daesh*/ISKP,<sup>13</sup> during the first nine months of 2019, the Taliban caused three quarters of civilian casualties from this incident type. Out of the 33 suicide and complex attacks in 2019, the Taliban carried out 24 of them, causing 1,327 civilian casualties (149 deaths and 1,178 injured). *Daesh*/ISKP was responsible for 336 civilian casualties (122 deaths and 214 injured) from six suicide and complex attacks. The remaining three such attacks were carried out by unidentified Anti-Government Elements, causing 116 civilian casualties (29 deaths and 87 injured).

UNAMA documented extensive harm to civilians from several indiscriminate and disproportionate mass-casualty suicide and complex attacks across the country, a number of which occurred in July and affected both schools and hospitals. On 1 July, the Taliban carried out a complex attack on the logistics and engineering hub of the Afghan Ministry of Defence in Kabul, causing 151 civilian casualties (7 deaths including one child and 144 injured including 28 children). The Taliban detonated a truck used as suicide vehicle-borne IED, allowing two men armed with AK-47s to enter the compound. They opened fire while two other attackers entered to the vacant upper floors of a building, which were under construction, while on the ground floor a school was located. Subsequently, the Afghan special police unit CRU-222 arrived on the scene and ended the attack. Six nearby schools sustained damages. Just six days later, on 7 July, in Ghazni city, the Taliban carried out an attack with a truck used as suicide vehicle borne IED on an NDS compound, which was located in a residential area, close to three schools. As a result, six civilians, including three children, were killed and 168 civilians were injured, including 82 children. The Taliban claimed responsibility for both incidents.<sup>14</sup>

On 19 September, a further 28 civilians were killed and 130 injured in a Taliban-claimed attack in Qalat city, Zabul province. A truck bomb detonated near to the Qalat provincial NDS headquarters, near to the provincial hospital. The hospital was struck by the blast, causing casualties among patients, visiting family members, and 19 health care workers. The Qalat provincial hospital sustained serious damages to its structure and equipment and several ambulances were also destroyed. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the incident.<sup>15</sup>

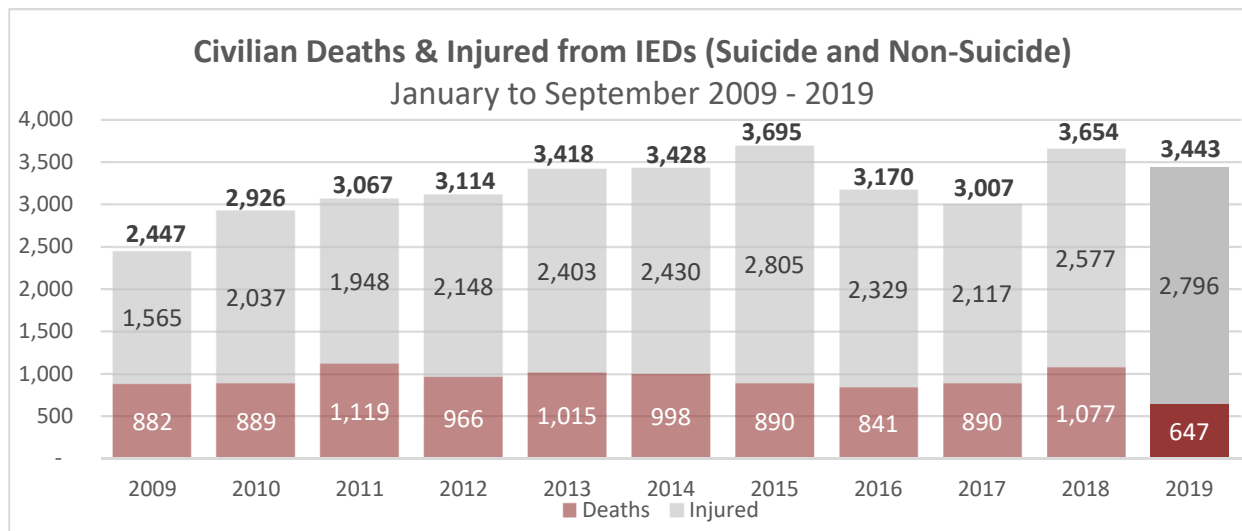
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<sup>12</sup> This includes 187 women casualties (13 deaths and injured) and 355 child casualties (33 deaths and 322 injured).

<sup>13</sup> From 1 January to 30 September 2018, *Daesh*/ISKP caused 1,741 civilian casualties from suicide IED attacks, representing 74 per cent of all civilian casualties from this incident type.

<sup>14</sup> The Taliban claimed responsibility for both incidents, the 1 July Kabul incident was claimed on Twitter in Pashto, accessible at [https://twitter.com/Zabehulah\\_M33/status/1145704786181939200](https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1145704786181939200); and the 5 July Ghazni incident was claimed on Twitter in English, accessible at [https://twitter.com/Zabehulah\\_M33/status/1147744181366001664](https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1147744181366001664).

<sup>15</sup> The Taliban claimed responsibility in English on Twitter, accessible at [https://twitter.com/QyAhmadi\\_1/status/1174573369775316992?s=20](https://twitter.com/QyAhmadi_1/status/1174573369775316992?s=20).



UNAMA has also continued to document extensive harm to civilians from the use of non-suicide IEDs by Anti-Government Elements, causing 1,657 civilian casualties (345 deaths and 1,312 injured)<sup>16</sup> in the first nine months of 2019, a 26 per cent increase in comparison to the same period in 2018. Of particular concern is the use of pressure-plate IEDs, which are victim-operated and function as landmines. These IEDs caused 446 civilian casualties (171 deaths and 275 injured) of which more than 95 per cent are attributed to Taliban. On 15 July in Khakrez district, Kandahar province, a vehicle travelling in a convoy of approximately ten cars hit a pressure-plate IED, causing 53 civilian casualties (13 deaths including and 40 injured), the majority of whom were women and children. Most of the casualties came from two vehicles – one was destroyed and the other damaged. The Taliban stated on the Voice of Jihad website, “[o]ver 35 killed and wounded as 2 vehicles destroyed in Khakrez”, claiming that they targeted Afghan national security forces.<sup>17</sup> UNAMA visited the victims at the hospital, which included an eight-month-old baby with traumatic injuries, and received no other reports of IED incidents in that area on that day.

On 31 July, in Bala Buluk district, Farah province, a bus heading to Kandahar on the main highway triggered a pressure-plate IED, resulting in 42 civilian casualties (24 deaths and 18 wounded). On 3 September, the Taliban stated that its Protection of Civilians Casualties and Complaints Commission dispatched a team to the site for an investigation, detained the individual responsible for the incident and forwarded him to the Shariah courts.<sup>18</sup>

UNAMA reiterates that indiscriminate and disproportionate IED attacks are serious violations of international humanitarian law that may amount to war crimes. UNAMA repeats its call on Anti-Government Elements to immediately end the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of all IEDs, especially in areas frequented by civilians, including the use of body-borne IEDs and vehicle-borne IEDs during suicide and complex attacks. UNAMA urges Anti-Government Elements to immediately stop the use of pressure-plate IEDs, which are inherently indiscriminate. These devices are victim-activated and function as landmines and place civilians at extreme risk as their effects cannot be directed exclusively towards military objectives.

<sup>16</sup> This includes 123 women casualties (42 deaths and 81 injured) and 418 child casualties (91 deaths and 327 injured).

<sup>17</sup> The Taliban issued this statement in English on their website on 16 July 2019, accessible at <http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=48668>.

<sup>18</sup> The Taliban issued this statement on 3 September 2019 in English on their website, accessible at <http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=51111>.

### *Election-related violence*

On 28 September, Afghanistan held its fourth presidential election since 2004. Against the backdrop of increasing civilian casualties, levels of election-related violence resulting in civilian casualties remained relatively low in the months leading up to polling day as compared to the parliamentary elections in 2018.<sup>19</sup> However, two mass-casualty suicide attacks at election-related sites in July and September together caused 152 civilian casualties (51 deaths and 101 injured), raising security concerns for polling day. The Taliban issued three statements in August and in September, warning Afghan citizens that election gatherings and rallies could become a target and urging teachers and students to stay away from polling centres, including the ones located in schools, which could become the target of attacks.<sup>20</sup>

While UNAMA did not document any mass-casualty incidents during polling day, election-related violence on 28 September caused 277 civilian casualties (28 deaths and 249 injured). About 95 per cent of civilian casualties were caused by extensive Taliban operations intended to disrupt the presidential election, with the remaining attributed to crossfire incidents from fighting between Anti-Government Elements and Afghan security forces and one incident involving pro-Government armed groups.

More than half of all civilian casualties during polling day were caused by indirect fire attacks such as rockets, mortars and grenades, which have inaccurate delivery systems; when fired from or to civilian-populated areas, the risk of indiscriminate effects is high. Of grave concern, amongst the verified civilian casualties are 23 women (4 deaths and 19 injured) and 103 children (13 deaths and 90 injured) who were mostly harmed by attacks using indirect fire, without participating in the electoral process.

In total, UNAMA documented 458 civilian casualties (85 deaths and 373 injured) as a result of election-related violence from the first incident during the top-up registration that started in June 2019 until 30 September, two days after polling day.

UNAMA also documented 120 incidents of threat, intimidation and harassment, including 92 on polling day alone. These included numerous IEDs that were emplaced at or near polling sites and discovered and diffused by Afghan national security forces before detonation. UNAMA verified the abduction of 24 civilians by the Taliban related to the electoral process, including eight election workers that were abducted on polling day in Shinwari district, Parwan province.

UNAMA continues its work to substantiate remaining allegations of civilian casualties resulting from election-related violence. Additional details of election-related violence may be found in the UNAMA Special Report on Elections Violence, released on 15 October.<sup>21</sup>

UNAMA calls on Anti-Government Elements to immediately cease attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, including election-related sites. The mission urges Anti-Government Elements to cease the practice of firing mortars, rockets and grenades from and into civilian-populated areas and cease all actions intended to spread fear amongst the Afghan population.

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<sup>19</sup> For more information on election-related violence in relation to the parliamentary elections, see the two Special Reports issued by UNAMA in May and November 2018, available at: <http://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>.

<sup>20</sup> The Taliban issued two of the statement on its English website, available at <https://alemarahenglish.com/?p=49655> and <https://alemarahenglish.com/?p=52430>. The other statement was issued on Twitter in Pashto, available at [https://twitter.com/Zabehulah\\_M33/status/1174192534354108416?s=20](https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1174192534354108416?s=20).

<sup>21</sup> This report is available on UNAMA's website at <http://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>.

### *Deliberate attacks against civilians and civilian objects*

In addition to election-related violence, UNAMA continued to document other instances of deliberate attacks against civilians, including through the use of IEDs. From 1 January to 30 September, UNAMA documented 2,313 civilian casualties (593 deaths and 1,720 injured) from deliberate attacks against civilians, which represents a decrease of 25 per cent from the same time period in 2018.<sup>22</sup> While the overall number of civilian casualties may have decreased, primarily due to a significant reduction in attacks by *Daesh*/ISKP, it is notable that the civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban from this type of attacks increased by nine per cent.<sup>23</sup>

During the third quarter of 2019, UNAMA continued to document deliberate sectarian-motivated attacks by *Daesh*/ISKP against the Shi'a Muslim population. On 17 August, a body borne IED detonated in a wedding hall in Kabul during a large wedding ceremony, attended mainly by Shi'a Muslims. As a result, 91 civilians were killed and 143 wounded, including 15 children killed and 35 children wounded. *Daesh*/ISKP claimed responsibility for the attack, citing a sectarian motive.<sup>24</sup>

UNAMA also documented incidents of the Taliban deliberately targeting individuals and infrastructure associated with the Salaam Telecommunication network. On 26 August, the Taliban issued a statement declaring the company and its infrastructure as military targets, stating that its employees would be considered as personnel of "an intelligence organ", and indicating that "legal action" would be taken against anyone found carrying a Salaam SIM card. Prior to the issuance of the statement, on 23 July in Chemtal district, Balkh province, the Taliban accused a man of carrying a Salaam SIM card and spying for the Afghan government, beheading him with a knife. On 8 August in Kabul city, a magnetic IED on a car belonging to the Chief Commercial Officer of Salaam Telecommunications detonated, killing him and injuring his bodyguard. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.<sup>25</sup> On 13 September, in Spin Boldak district, Kandahar, a 17-year-old boy was killed with a knife by the Taliban in the Salaam Telecommunication compound after taking over his father's shift as a guard. UNAMA also verified incidents in which the Taliban attacked Salaam facilities in Kabul, Kandahar city, and Khost city after the statement was issued.

UNAMA recalls that attacks deliberately targeting and/or killing of civilians are serious violations of international humanitarian law that amount to war crimes.<sup>26</sup> In addition, widespread or systematic attacks directed against a civilian population, including religious and ethnic minorities, in which civilians are intentionally killed may constitute crimes against humanity.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> In the first nine months of 2018, UNAMA documented 3039 civilian casualties (1,094 deaths and 1,999 injured)

<sup>23</sup> In the first nine months of 2018, UNAMA documented 1,194 civilian casualties (533 deaths and 661 injured) related to deliberate attacks against civilians that were attributed to the Taliban, while in 2019, UNAMA documented 1,302 civilian casualties (362 deaths, 940 injured).

<sup>24</sup> The claims of *Daesh*/ISKP are on file in the UNAMA Protection of Civilians database.

<sup>25</sup> The Taliban claimed the incident on its website in Pashto, available at <http://shahamat1.com/?p=170317>.

<sup>26</sup> Common Article 3; Additional Protocol II, Articles 4(2), 13(2); Rome Statute, Articles 8(2)(c) and 8(2)(e)(i); ICRC Customary International Humanitarian Law Study, Rules 1, 6, 89, 156.

<sup>27</sup> For example, crimes against humanity as defined in Article 7 of the Rome Statute include, *inter alia*, acts of murder; extermination; or persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender, or other grounds; and other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack.

## Pro-Government Forces

From 1 January to 30 September 2019, Pro-Government Forces caused 2,348 civilian casualties (1,149 deaths and 1,199 injured)<sup>28</sup>, a 26 per cent increase from the corresponding period in 2018. Pro-Government Forces were responsible for 28 per cent of civilian casualties overall. During the first nine months of 2019 UNAMA attributed 1,261 civilian casualties (484 deaths and 777 injured), representing 15 per cent of all civilian casualties, to Afghan national security forces, similar to the civilian casualty figures from the same time period in 2018<sup>29</sup>. UNAMA attributed 682 civilian casualties (468 deaths and 214 injured), representing eight per cent of civilian casualties, to International Military Forces, which is over a four-fold increase as compared to last year.<sup>30</sup> UNAMA attributed 155 civilian casualties (79 deaths and 76 injured), representing two per cent of all civilian casualties, to pro-Government armed groups, with Paktika-based Shaheen Forces surpassing the Khost Protection Force in terms of civilian casualties caused. The remaining 250 civilian casualties (118 deaths and 132 injured), representing three per cent of all civilian casualties, were attributed to undetermined or multiple Pro-Government Forces.

The majority of civilian casualties caused by Pro-Government Forces resulted from ground engagements, followed by airstrikes and then search operations, similar to trends reported in 2018 at the third quarter. Civilian casualties caused by Pro-Government Forces from all three of these incidents types, increased during the first three quarters of 2019 as compared to the same time period in 2018, namely ground engagement (28 per cent); aerial operations (28 per cent); and search operations (16 per cent). UNAMA documented the highest number of civilian casualties recorded from both aerial and search operations in the first nine months of any year since UNAMA began systematic documentation.

### *Aerial Operations*

UNAMA has documented a continual increase in civilian casualties from aerial operations since 2014, with International Military Forces responsible for the majority of civilian casualties from this incident type since 2018. From 1 January to 30 September 2019, airstrikes caused 885 civilian casualties (579 deaths and 306 injured).<sup>31</sup> This represents a 28 per cent increase in overall civilian casualties from this incident type in comparison to the first nine months of 2018. Almost one-fifth of all civilian casualties from airstrikes occurred in Helmand province.<sup>32</sup> While the number of civilians injured from airstrikes decreased by 14 per cent, the number of civilian deaths increased by 71 per cent; aerial operations is the leading incident type of civilian deaths in the first nine months of 2019. UNAMA attributed 74 per cent of the civilian casualties resulting from airstrikes to International Military Forces and 19 per cent to the Afghan Air Force.<sup>33</sup> For the remaining 7 per cent, specific attribution could not be established.

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<sup>28</sup> This includes 346 women casualties (130 deaths and 216 injured) and 804 child casualties (312 deaths and 492 injured).

<sup>29</sup> In the first nine months of 2018, UNAMA attributed 1,274 civilian casualties (496 deaths and 778 injured) to Afghan national security forces.

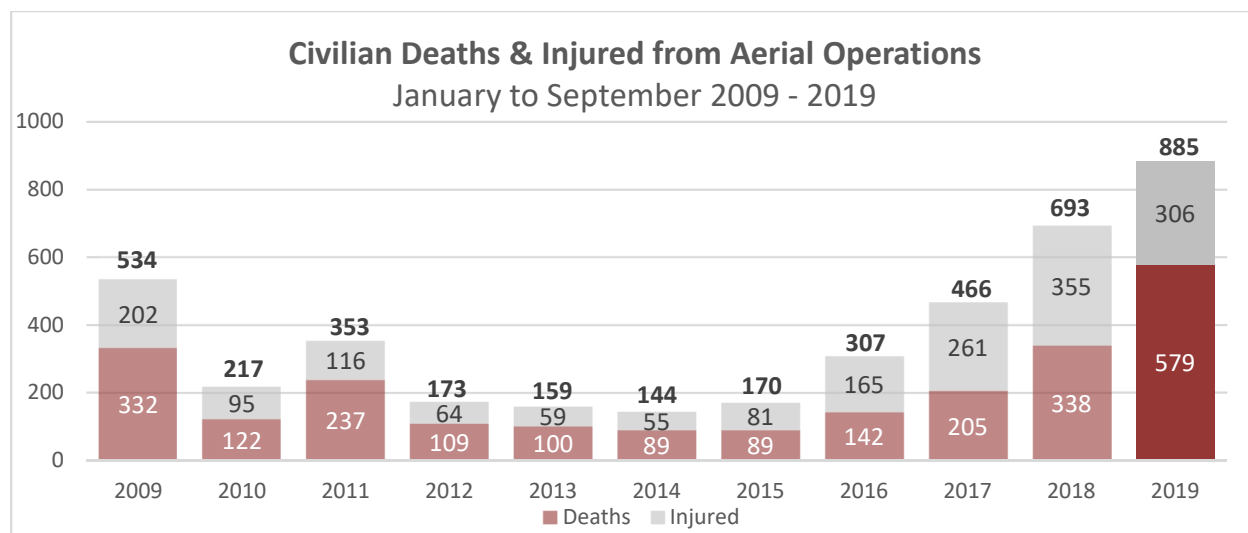
<sup>30</sup> In the first nine months of 2018, UNAMA attributed 149 (82 deaths and 67 injured) civilian casualties to International Military Forces.

<sup>31</sup> This includes 114 women casualties (60 deaths and 54 injured) and 284 child casualties (163 deaths and 121 injured).

<sup>32</sup> According to UN Department of Safety and Security, during the first nine months of 2019, 1265 airstrikes were conducted as compared to 928 airstrikes conducted during the same time period in 2018, a 36 per cent increase. Almost a third of the airstrikes recorded during the first nine months of 2019 happened in Helmand province.

<sup>33</sup> During the third quarter of 2019, civilian casualties from Afghan Air Force strikes increased as compared to the previous quarter while civilian casualties from International Military Force strikes decreased in comparison to the previous quarter.





UNAMA continued to document civilian casualties resulting from airstrikes by International Military Forces in support of Afghan and International Military Forces on the ground, including operations by NDS Special Forces. On 22 September 2019, at 23:00 hours, in Musa Qala district, Helmand province, NDS Special Forces conducted an operation against a reported high-value target. Clashes erupted between Pro-Government Forces and Anti-Government Elements on the ground. USFOR-A conducted airstrikes targeting the Taliban and Al-Qaeda positions. At the same time, two vehicles travelling back from wedding were hit by airstrikes. At the time of drafting the report, UNAMA has verified the death of 15 civilians (including five women and nine children) and 11 civilians injured (including two women and six children).<sup>34</sup> According to the Afghanistan National Security Council, the operation was conducted against a “high-profile Al Qaeda group embedded with Taliban leaders” and a number of Taliban, “foreign fighters” and family members were taken into custody.<sup>35</sup> President Ghani expressed his concern over reports of civilian casualties and asked the Provincial Governor to investigate the matter.<sup>36</sup> USFOR-A has initiated an investigation under United States Army Regulation 15-6.

On 19 September, at approximately 02:00 hours, in Khogyani district, Nangarhar province, USFOR-A conducted multiple airstrikes on individuals in a wooded area controlled by *Daesh*/ISKP. Male civilian labourers were working in the area to harvest pinecones for the pine nut industry. Provincial government authorities, including Afghan national security forces, had been given advance notice in writing of the labourers plans to enter *Daesh*/ISKP territory to conduct the work.<sup>37</sup> Agreement to access the area was also given by *Daesh*/ISKP. At the time of the incident, the labourers were sleeping in multiple tents, scattered around the area. At the time of drafting the report, UNAMA has verified the death of 19 civilian males and 11 civilian males sustained injuries as a result of the airstrikes. UNAMA is verifying claims that some of the victims may have been children and that some of the labourers are still missing. Shortly after the incident, USFOR-A paid compensation to the families of eight of the individuals killed, acknowledging they were civilian.

<sup>34</sup> The number of injured in this incident has been updated since it was originally published.

<sup>35</sup> The Office of the National Security Council issued this statement in English on Twitter, accessible at <https://twitter.com/NSCAfghan/status/1176212078069276677?s=20>.

<sup>36</sup> For more information, please see <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/activists-relatives-helmand-seek-justice-civilian-deaths>.

<sup>37</sup> Letter of the Office of the Nangarhar Governor informing Afghan security forces dated 3 September 2019 is on file in the UNAMA Protection of Civilians database.

UNAMA has in recent years consistently raised its concern about the increasing numbers of civilian casualties arising from airstrikes, and the need for continuous review of targeting criteria and pre-engagement precautionary measures. UNAMA urges Pro-Government Forces to take all feasible precautions to avoid, and in any event to minimize, incidental loss of civilian life and injury to civilians;<sup>38</sup> and to do everything feasible to verify that targets are military objects under international humanitarian law.<sup>39</sup> UNAMA cautions that reliance on technology without sufficient corroborating human intelligence could increase the chances of causing unintended harm to civilians.

### *Search operations*

During the first nine months of 2019, UNAMA recorded 276 civilian casualties (205 deaths and 71 injured)<sup>40</sup> as a result of search operations, a 16 per cent increase from the same period in 2018.<sup>41</sup> More than half of the civilian casualties were caused by NDS Special Forces. Of concern are the increasing numbers of civilian casualties caused by operations carried out in the southeast of Afghanistan by a pro-Government armed group from Urgan district, Paktika, referred to locally as “Shaheen Forces”. In the first nine months of 2019, UNAMA attributed 147 civilian casualties (105 deaths and 42 injured) from search operations<sup>42</sup> to NDS Special Forces<sup>43</sup>; 26 civilian deaths to Shaheen Forces, 13 civilian deaths to Khost Protection Force, and 11 civilian deaths to both the Shaheen Forces or Khost Protection Force.<sup>44</sup> UNAMA has documented that search operations carried out by NDS Special Forces, the Khost Protection Force and Shaheen Forces have significantly higher civilian casualty figures as well as higher death rates in comparison to search operations carried out by the Afghan National Army.

In addition to civilian casualties, UNAMA has repeatedly raised concerns about incidents of human rights violations and abuses, including arbitrary arrests and damage to civilian property, associated with these operations, which have fuelled protests and fostered frustration amongst local communities. Noting the rising number of civilian casualties, UNAMA is increasingly concerned about the lack of consideration and due diligence of Pro-Government Forces to accurately verify military objectives in the context of search operations.

On the night of 11-12 August, during Eid al-Qurban, in Zurmat district, Paktya province, Shaheen Forces, supported by United States forces, conducted a search operation, killing 11 civilians inside four different compounds within the same area. The victims included four students and an employee of the Ministry of Education. Following the incident, approximately 500 protesters gathered in Kabul as part of a justice campaign for the family members of the victims. Representatives of the protesters met with the Afghan Minister of Defence and the Director-General (DG) of the NDS. On August 14, the National Security Council issued a statement calling for an investigation into civilian casualty allegations and accountability measures in relation to the incident.<sup>45</sup> On 15 August a high-level delegation comprised of the Ministers of Defence and Interior, the

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<sup>38</sup> ICRC Customary International Humanitarian Law Study, Rule 15.

<sup>39</sup> ICRC Customary International Humanitarian Law Study, Rule 16.

<sup>40</sup> This includes 26 women casualties (9 deaths and 17 injured) and 44 child casualties (21 deaths and 23 injured).

<sup>41</sup> For the first nine months of 2018, UNAMA recorded 238 civilian casualties (191 deaths and 47 injured).

<sup>42</sup> The number of injured in this incident has been updated since it was originally published.

<sup>43</sup> This includes 70 civilian casualties (58 deaths and 12 injured) attributed to NDS-02, active in Eastern Region; 57 civilian casualties (32 deaths and 18 injured) attributed to NDS-03, active in Southern Region; 22 civilian casualties (17 deaths and 5 deaths) attributed to NDS-01 active in Central Region.

<sup>44</sup> This includes search operations in which both Shaheen Forces and Khost Protection Force were involved.

<sup>45</sup> The office of the National Security Council issues the statement in English on Twitters, accessible at <https://twitter.com/NSCAfghan/status/1161686142779056129>.

DG of NDS, and NATO Resolute Support/USFOR-A Commander General Miller visited Gardez, Paktya province; this incident was reportedly discussed during the visit. The Office of the National Security Council confirmed that an investigation into the incident is ongoing.

On 4 September at 22:30 hours in Jalalabad City, Nangarhar province, NDS Special Forces conducted a search operation in a residential compound. NDS Special Forces detained the men for questioning and separated the women and children into a neighbouring compound. Four of the men were shot at close range and killed in three separate rooms. The other eight men were shortly detained and released the following day. According to the NDS Special Forces, the target of the operation was four *Daesh*/ISKP financial supporters and the *Daesh*/ISKP financial manager for Nangarhar province.<sup>46</sup> On 5 September, the morning after the operation, the family members of the victims brought the bodies to the Provincial Governor's office, demanding justice. The protest drew as many as 800 people. That same day, President Ghani announced that he had accepted the resignation of the then-DG of NDS Stanekzai, stating that "as a responsible state we have zero tolerance for civilian casualties".<sup>47</sup> He further indicated that he had ordered the Attorney General to investigate the incident and to "bring the perpetrators to justice".<sup>48</sup> The Office of the National Security Council confirmed that an investigation into the incident is ongoing. In addition, sources confirmed that President Ghani called the father of the four victims of the operation to offer his condolences. UNAMA also takes note of the statements of President Ghani with regards to changing the conduct of NDS Special Forces with a view to prevent civilian casualties and looks forward to seeing progress on this issue.<sup>49</sup>

UNAMA reiterates that the killing, by any party to the conflict, of persons taking no active part in hostilities is explicitly prohibited by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions at any time and any place, and may amount to a war crime. UNAMA also reiterates that under international human rights law, the unlawful killing of a person constitutes a violation of the right to life.

UNAMA calls on the Afghan authorities to immediately disband and disarm all illegal armed groups and militias, including the Khost Protection Force and Shaheen Forces, or formally incorporate members into the Afghan national security forces following a robust vetting procedure; increase transparency and accountability concerning operations of NDS Special Forces, which appear to fall outside of the official Afghan national security forces' chain of command<sup>50</sup>; and investigate all allegations of human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations with a view to ensuring accountability.

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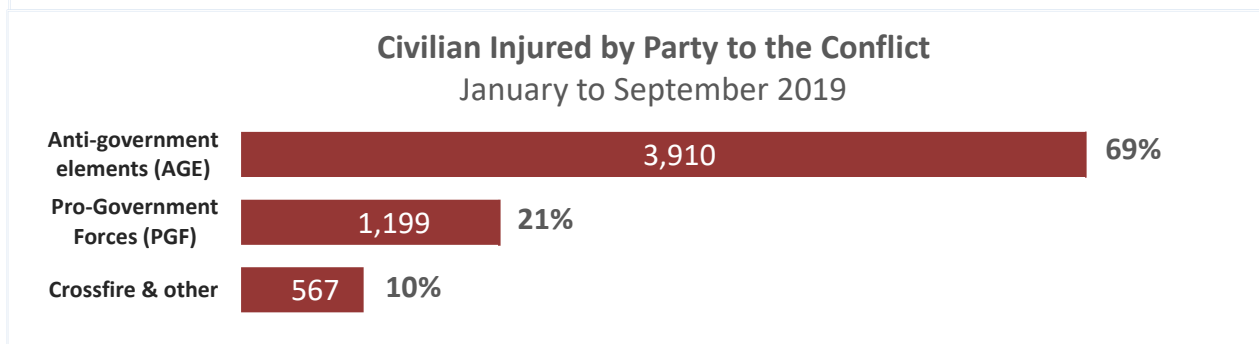
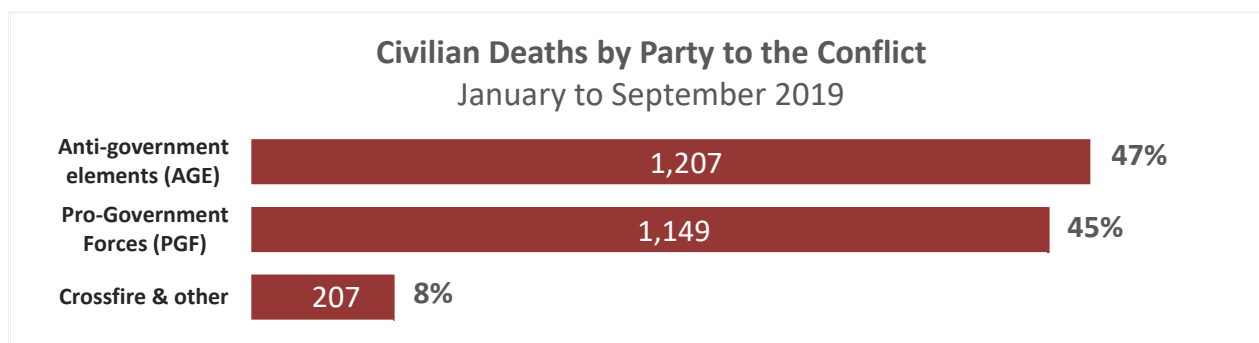
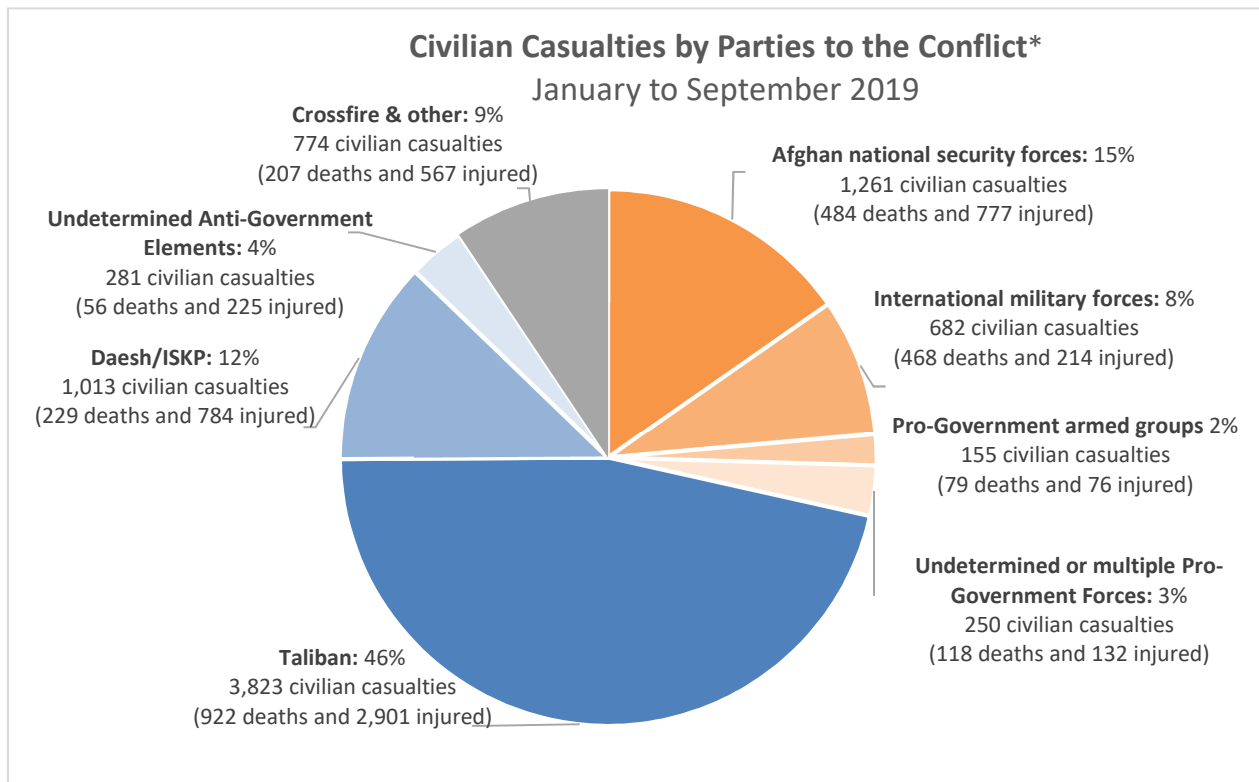
<sup>46</sup> NDS 03 press release from 5 September 2019 is on file in the UNAMA Protection of Civilians database.

<sup>47</sup> The President of Afghanistan issued this statement in English on Twitter, accessible at <https://twitter.com/ashrafghani/status/1169589280911560704>.

<sup>48</sup> The President of Afghanistan issued this statement in English on Twitter, accessible at <https://twitter.com/ashrafghani/status/1169589285969899521>.

<sup>49</sup> For example see President Ghani's interview with Shamsad TV on 21 September 2019, starting at 59:10 minutes, accessible at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M\\_4uR6dBCus](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_4uR6dBCus).

<sup>50</sup> As explained to UNAMA by sources, including high-ranking national and provincial officials of the Government of Afghanistan.



\* Due to the rounding to full percentage points, the sum of the individual pieces of the pie chart only indicates 99 per cent instead of 100 per cent.

## Children and Armed Conflict

Children continued to be severely impacted by the armed conflict in Afghanistan. Between 1 January and 30 September 2019, UNAMA recorded 2,461 child casualties (631 deaths and 1,830 injured), an overall increase of 11 per cent compared to the same period in 2018. While child deaths decreased by eight per cent, the number of injured children increased by 20 per cent.

The increase in child casualties resulted primarily from a significant increase in suicide and non-suicide IED attacks as well as ground engagements, including the use of indirect fire weapons systems that had indiscriminate effects on polling day for the 2019 presidential election. Ground engagements remained the leading cause of child casualties, followed by suicide and non-suicide IED attacks, and explosive remnants of war. The mission reiterates concern that children comprised the majority - 77 per cent - of civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war.

### *Attacks impacting education and health facilities*

Children are also disproportionately impacted by attacks on schools and hospitals, which impede their access to education and health services. On the night of 8 to 9 July in Daimardad district, Wardak province, NDS Special Forces conducted an operation on a health clinic that is supported by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and that reportedly supplies health services to approximately half the population in the district. NDS Special Forces shot and killed an adult male outside of the main building who had accompanied one of the patients to the clinic and then entered the facility and conducted a room-by-room search. NDS separated two adult men, a guard and a lab technician for the clinic, from the rest of the group and took them outside; everyone inside the compound was warned not to leave for one hour. Ten to fifteen minutes later, gunshots were heard, and the bodies of the lab technician and guard were found approximately 200 meters from the clinic, both shot in the head. UNAMA verified the death of three civilians. The Office of the National Security Council confirmed that an investigation into the incident is ongoing. On 13 July 2019, reportedly in reaction to this incident, the Taliban forced the closure of 42 clinics in three different areas under their control in Maidan Wardak province. On 19 July 2019, the Taliban agreed to reopen all of the closed clinics.

In relation to incidents impacting healthcare, on 11 April, the Taliban had banned activities of the World Health Organization (WHO), which effectively brought all polio vaccination campaigns to a halt. On 25 September, the Taliban announced that it would lift its ban on WHO activities in areas under its control, which was imposed in April of 2019. However, the resumption of WHO activities was permitted only with conditions. In particular, the Taliban indicated that vaccination campaigns would only be allowed to be carried out from health facilities and the ban on house to house vaccination campaigns remained. As of 1 October 2019, Afghanistan reported a total of 16 cases of polio, with poliovirus transmission geographically limited to the southern and eastern regions. Fifteen of these 16 cases were reported from areas where vaccinators had difficulty accessing the children.

*Since 2009, UNAMA has been systematically documenting civilian casualties attributed to parties to the conflict in Afghanistan using a consistent methodology, which has allowed for year-on-year trend analysis and reporting. The work of UNAMA on protection of civilians is grounded in principles of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and its methodology is based on best practices and the guidance of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Existence of civilian casualties does not mean a violation has been committed, although high numbers of casualties may be indicative of violations or reflect patterns of harm. UNAMA engages with parties to the conflict to receive information about civilian casualties and takes this information into account when*

*determining civilian casualties. UNAMA takes note of the differences in methodologies for tracking civilian casualties, interpretations of international humanitarian law, and sources of information that have typically contributed to different outcomes in civilian casualty figures. Since a common goal is to reduce civilian casualties, UNAMA remains committed to discussions with the parties to the conflict to better protect civilians.<sup>51</sup>*

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<sup>51</sup> For more information on UNAMA methodology, please see UNAMA, *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Annual Report 2018*, (23 February 2019), available online at <https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports>.