

U.S. and NATO forces kill more civilians than Taliban

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Errant Afghan civilian deaths surge

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN — After more than five years of increasingly intense warfare, the conflict in Afghanistan reached a grim milestone in the first half of this year: U.S. troops and their NATO allies killed more civilians than insurgents did, according to several independent tallies. The upsurge in deaths at the hands of Western forces has been driven by Taliban tactics as well as by actions of the American military and its allies.



But the growing toll is causing widespread disillusionment among the Afghan people, eroding support for the government of President Hamid Karzai and exacerbating political rifts among NATO allies about the nature and goals of the mission in Afghanistan.

More than 500 Afghan civilians have been reported killed this year, and the rate has dramatically increased in the last month.

In some instances, it was difficult to determine whether the dead were combatants or noncombatants. But in many other cases, there was no doubt that the person killed was a bystander to war.

Still, Western military leaders argue that any comparison of casualties caused by Western forces and by the Taliban is fundamentally unfair because there is a clear moral distinction to be made between accidental deaths resulting from combat operations and deliberate killings of innocents by militants.

"No [Western] soldier ever wakes up in the morning with the intention of harming any Afghan citizen," said Maj. John Thomas, a spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. "If that does inadvertently happen, it is deeply, deeply regretted."

Moreover, alliance officials say Taliban fighters are ultimately to blame for many of the fatalities attributed to coalition military operations because the insurgents deliberately place civilians in harm's way, using them as human shields and employing other brutal tactics.

Human rights groups acknowledge that there are mitigating circumstances. But to the families of victims such as Azizullah the salt merchant, such distinctions are lost in a wave of grief and indignation.

At dawn on June 16, Azizullah went to prayers with his older brother, Mohammed Reza. It was the last time Reza saw his younger brother alive.

At midmorning, Reza received a call on his cellphone from Afghan police saying Azizullah had been wounded, then another saying that he had died, shot by North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops as he sipped a cool drink a few steps from his storefront in a rundown district of Kabul.

"Why? Why?" Reza asked. "They are supposed to protect us, not kill us."

In a communal society such as Afghanistan, "no death is isolated," said Hekmat Karzai, who runs a security think tank in Kabul and is a cousin of the president. "When one person dies, it affects a whole village or clan or tribe. Ultimately, it affects everyone, and there's no escaping that."

By late June, the United Nations mission in Afghanistan, working with local rights groups, had counted 314 civilian deaths at the hands of Western-led forces and 279 people killed by the Taliban and other militants. But that figure did not include at least 45 civilian deaths reported by local officials last weekend in Helmand province's Gereshk district.

Separate counts by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and the Associated Press differed slightly, but also indicated that more civilians were killed by Western troops than by militants during the first half of 2007.

On June 23, in response to the deaths of more than 100 noncombatants in a single week that were blamed on Western artillery or airstrikes in southern Afghanistan, President Karzai unleashed an angry call for caution by U.S. and NATO forces.

"Afghan life is not cheap, and it should not be treated as such," the Afghan president told reporters in Kabul.

Aides said Karzai believed that his language, the sharpest to date on the subject, was the only way to get the attention of Western policymakers after repeated appeals had gone unanswered.

Neither NATO nor U.S. forces keep a tally of civilian deaths, but Thomas said the military did not dispute the figures cited by Karzai. All sides, however, acknowledge that counting casualties is an inexact science.

Because Taliban fighters do not wear military uniforms, they can be as difficult to identify in death as in life. Much of the fighting takes place in remote, rugged areas that are difficult for independent investigators to reach.

NATO and U.S. military officials say that when in doubt, human rights groups sometimes count ambiguous cases among the civilian dead, a contention sharply disputed by the investigators.

"There is always a margin of error, but no one is interested in inflating these figures," said Anja de Beer, the director of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, a consortium of humanitarian groups that also tallies civilian deaths.

"We do not rely only on what people say immediately after a battle. Our investigators follow up afterward, talk to village elders, to families, and look at fresh graves," De Beer said. "When there is any question of identity, we take that into account."

Often, civilians are killed in the aftermath of an attack by insurgents. Azizullah was shot and killed by troops responding to a car bomb that went off about half a mile away.

The NATO-led force said at the time that initial indications were that a soldier's weapon had accidentally discharged. Two weeks later, a spokesman said there had been no further findings.

Azizullah's family, an extended clan of 25 living in a mud-brick compound on the outskirts of the capital, veered between mourning and fury.

"Who will bring my son back to me?" asked his weeping, white-turbaned father, Mohammed Zia. "No one, no one. Not even God."

The family was particularly angered by the fact that the shooting took place more than an hour after the explosion and that there was no report of hostile fire directed at troops.

"We thought the foreign troops, the Americans, would bring peace to this country," said the father. "Now they have killed my son, and I do not want to see their faces ever again."

Political analysts say that despite the increase in civilian deaths, most Afghans still support the presence of international troops.

"It's an obvious truth that the Western forces bring security that we need," said Said Najib Mahmood, a political science professor at Kabul University. "But they are killing a lot of people, and because of that there is a loss of trust and confidence in the government."

Many analysts say the nature of combat tactics employed by both sides makes it very difficult for the military to avoid inflicting civilian casualties, a fact that the Taliban movement exploits to the maximum.

When allied forces come under fire from a walled compound of the kind that dots every Afghan village, the likeliest response is an airstrike — a strategy that exposes Western troops to less danger than moving in on foot.

Sometimes, even hours of painstaking surveillance fail to turn up signs of noncombatants in the line of fire.

"Often we will refrain from making a strike because we suspect there might be civilians present," said Thomas. "But sometimes we're wrong."

If so, the consequences can be devastating.

"We see whole families killed together in their home — mothers, babies, everyone," said Abdul Matim, a parliament member from Helmand province, who has personally investigated many of the

civilian deaths in his home district. "It's a terrible sight."

Another common insurgent tactic is suicide car bombings aimed at military convoys. In response, jittery troops sometimes fire on civilians who are merely driving erratically or who accidentally come between military vehicles. Often there are more such shootings when a contingent of troops has recently arrived in Afghanistan.

"It takes time to figure out that not everyone in a turban is a suicide bomber," said Karzai, the analyst, who directs the independent Center for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul.

After a suicide bombing last week on the outskirts of Kabul that targeted a U.S. military convoy and killed two Western security officers, Afghan police anxiously waved journalists away.

"Don't go close," they warned. "The Americans might shoot you."

Criticism over civilian casualties frustrates NATO and U.S. officials, who say atrocities by the Taliban expose civilians to far greater dangers.

In one widely cited recent case, insurgents allegedly tried to trick a 6-year-old boy into blowing himself up at an Afghan police checkpoint, fitting him with a suicide vest they told him would eject flowers at the push of a button. Police managed to free the child.

At the same time, Western officials acknowledge that whatever the provocation, they must adhere to international norms of combat.

"We are rightly held to a higher standard of behavior," said Nicholas Lunt, the chief NATO civilian spokesman in Afghanistan.

At the compound of Azizullah's family, his four children, all younger than 5, tussled together on the floor and gazed with bright curiosity at visitors. Their uncle Mohammed Reza explained that they were too young to comprehend that their father was dead.

"I asked them where they think he is, and they say they don't know," he said. "They don't understand yet that he is never coming back."

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