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## Taliban responsible for 77% of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, U.N. says

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban and other insurgent groups were responsible for nearly 80 percent of the civilian deaths in the war in Afghanistan last year, said a U.N. report released Saturday.

The report said the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan documented 3,021 civilian deaths in the conflict in 2011 — up 8 percent from 2010, which saw 2,790 deaths, and an increase of 25 percent from 2009, when 2,412 civilians were killed.

The U.N. said "anti-government elements" — shorthand for the Taliban and other insurgent groups — were responsible for 2,332, or 77 percent, of conflict-related deaths in 2011, up 14 percent from 2010.

The report said 410 civilian deaths, or 14 percent of the 2011 total, were caused by operations by "pro-government forces," or Afghan, U.S. and international security forces — a drop of 4 percent from 2010. A further 279 deaths, or 9 percent of civilian fatalities, could not be blamed on any side.

A leading Afghan politician and women's rights activist labeled Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar a hypocrite and called his followers terrorists in the wake of the report.

"Civilian casualties by any side are not acceptable," said Fawzia Kufi, a member of Parliament and head of the National Assembly's women's affairs committee. She said the Afghan government as well as U.S. and international forces had to accept responsibility for not doing enough to protect innocent Afghans in the conflict.

But the Taliban had made terrorism the centrepiece of their strategy in Afghanistan. "They go for terrorist attacks," said Kufi, "They are intentionally targeting civilians."

Kufi accused the Taliban and Omar of hypocrisy and dishonesty.

"Mullah Omar said during (last year's Muslim festival of) Eid that civilian casualties were unacceptable, and that deliberately killing civilians was a breach of human rights," but the insurgents were attacking more civilians than previously, she said.

The U.N. report said the record loss of life of Afghan children, women and men "resulted from changes in the tactics of anti-government elements and changes in the effects of tactics of parties to the conflict."

Insurgents "used improvised explosive devices more frequently and more widely across the country, conducted deadlier suicide attacks yielding greater numbers of victims, and increased the unlawful and targeted killing of civilians," the report said.

The Taliban were targeting civilians as an act of terror, said Kufi, because they were being defeated by U.S. and international forces, but "they cannot justify their actions."

Attempts Saturday to reach Taliban spokesmen for comment were not successful.

Abdul Hakim Mujahid, a member of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, which is tasked with promoting negotiations with the insurgency, and formerly the Taliban ambassador to the U.N., told McClatchy on Saturday that he had not read the U.N. report. He described Kufi's criticism of the Taliban as "a media fight."

"I have absolutely no comment," said Mujahid.

U.S. Gen. John R. Allen, who commands U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan, said they would continue to do everything possible to reduce Afghan civilian casualties.

Allen said the drop in deaths caused by US and international forces was promising, "but there is more work to be done." Civilian deaths from air attacks — conducted mostly by U.S. forces — rose in 2011, despite a drop in the number of those attacks.

Insurgent improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, were "the single largest killer of Afghan children, women and men in 2011," according to the U.N. report, claiming 967 civilians — 32 percent, or nearly one-in-three, of those killed.

The report also recorded a huge rise in civilians killed in suicide attacks, with 431 fatalities in 2011 — a jump of 80 percent from the previous year.

"While the number of suicide attacks did not increase over 2010, the nature of these attacks changed, becoming more complex, sometimes involving multiple suicide bombers, and designed to yield greater numbers of dead and injured civilians," the report said.

Mir Ahmad Joyenda, deputy director of the Kabul-based Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, and a former member of Parliament, said the rise in civilian deaths reported by the U.N. was a reminder that ordinary Afghans were at risk of violence "from morning to night."

"Nobody's safe, nobody's secure," said Joyenda. "Everyone is suffering."

The U.N. report urged the Afghan government and U.S. and international forces as well as insurgents to do more to protect civilians and minimize deaths and injury among non-combatants.

That would be a particular challenge with insurgents, said Joyenda, as there were many such groups and the Taliban had become more fragmented. He said even Taliban leader Omar seemed unable to limit the violence.

"Many times he has issued an edict that civilian casualties are to be avoided," said Joyenda, but the rising number of civilian deaths that the Taliban was responsible for "suggests that Mullah Omar has lost control over his army."

Pressure had to be put on Pakistan's military spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, or ISI, to convince the Taliban not to commit suicide attacks, Joyenda said.

The ISI has had strong ties with the Taliban since the Taliban rose to power in the 1990's, and is often accused by the Afghan government and the U.S.-led coalition of aiding the insurgents.

However, Kufi was not hopeful that insurgents would move away from targeting civilians.

She said the Taliban "cannot win on the battlefield," so they would focus on creating terror among the civilian population, both by suicide attacks and by targeting politicians and government officials.

U.S. and international forces also would be responsible for an increased rate of civilian deaths as the date for their withdrawal from Afghanistan drew closer, said Kufi.

Coalition forces would conduct more operations against insurgents, and that would lead to a rise in deaths of civilians caught up in the fighting.

"My assumption is that things will continue to get worse," she said.