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Rise in Afghan civilian casualties at hands of government forces

Armed opposition groups, primarily Taliban, still responsible for most civilian casualties but the balance is changing

Sune Engel Rasmussen

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An increasing number of Afghan civilians are killed and injured at the hands of government forces fighting extremist groups, according to the UN.

A report released on Sunday, documenting the first three months of 2016, shows a 70% rise in civilian casualties caused by pro-government forces, with 127 killed and 242 wounded.

A total of 600 civilians were killed and 1,343 injured during that period, a 2% increase in total casualties but a 13% drop in fatalities.

A growing proportion of those civilians are women and children. This year, one-third of civilian casualties have been children, a 29% jump from last year.

As the Guardian reported on Friday, dozens of Afghan schools are used for military purposes, putting children at risk by turning schools into potential targets. At least one, in Helmand, seized by the Afghan army, still had children attending classes.

Armed opposition groups, primarily the Taliban, are still responsible for 60% of civilian casualties. But the balance is changing. During the same period last year, the armed opposition accounted for 73% of civilian casualties, against 14% attributable to government forces, who now account for 19%.

While the Taliban used fewer improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and targeted murders, they killed a rising number of civilians in complex and suicide attacks.

The UN also expressed concern over civilians harmed in Afghan and civilian airstrikes: 27 – including six deaths and 21 injured – up from 16 casualties last year.

The numbers signal that the dynamics and tactics of the war are changing. With most international forces gone from the battlefield, the warring parties increasingly resort to ground engagements, often close to villages.

“The kind of fighting we see now is different. It’s more street fighting in the districts, house by house, which involves more civilian casualties than before,” said Luca Radaelli, medical coordinator for Emergency, an Italian-run NGO with three surgical centres in Afghanistan.

The persistent violence is inundating the limited health facilities in Afghanistan. Radaelli said Emergency received 22% more patients in the first two months of 2016, compared to same period last year.

The strain on medical facilities is also partly due to the loss of the Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Kunduz, which was destroyed in a US airstrike last year. Clinics are likely to come under further pressure, as many fear the Taliban’s newly announced fighting season will be the most violent in years.

But, said Nicholas Haysom, the UN chief in Afghanistan: “Even if a conflict intensifies, it does not have to be matched by corresponding civilian suffering provided parties take their international humanitarian law and human rights obligations seriously.”