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Reuters

Afghan war spreads to residential areas: U.N. report

By Laura MacInnis
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GENEVA – The Afghan battlefield is spreading into residential areas where more people are being killed by air strikes, car bombs and suicide attacks, according to a U.N. report published on Friday.

The U.N. Assistance Mission to Afghanistan said that 1,013 civilians were killed on the sidelines of the armed conflict from January to the end of June, compared to 818 in the first half of 2008 and 684 in the same period in 2007.

Commenting on the report, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said it was critical that steps be taken to shield Afghan communities from fighting.

"All parties involved in this conflict should take all measures to protect civilians, and to ensure the independent investigation of all civilian casualties, as well as justice and remedies for the victims," the South African said.

Taliban fighters and their allies were named responsible for 59 percent of bystander deaths, caused mainly by roadside blasts. The Afghan government and international forces were also faulted for errant air strikes that claimed hundreds of lives.

"Both anti-government elements and pro-government forces are responsible for the increase in civilian casualties," the human rights report said, arguing that tactical changes in the war had put more innocent people in the cross-fire.

A recent directive instructs U.S. forces to look for alternatives to continued fighting if they engage with the enemy in areas where civilians may be present, Lieutenant-Commander Christine Sidenstricker, spokeswoman for the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, said in a statement.

"We are doing everything we can to eliminate civilian casualties wherever possible," she said.

Insurgents, who previously targeted the Afghan military and NATO troops with frontal attacks and ambushes, are now employing "guerrilla-like measures" in residential zones "to deliberately blur the distinction between combatants and civilians," the U.N. report said.

This shift, it said, is "what appears to be an active policy aimed at drawing a military response to areas where there is a high likelihood that civilians will be killed or injured."

FURTHER CASUALTIES LIKELY

Afghan and international forces have launched more operations in areas where ordinary Afghans live, killing people and damaging homes, assets and infrastructure, the report said.

The United Nations warned that resistance to a U.S. troop surge and efforts to disrupt August elections [ID:nISL383254] could lead to more loss of life in Afghanistan, where war has been waged since U.S.-led forces ousted the Taliban in 2001 for having sheltered al Qaeda militants.

"Given the pattern of the conflict so far, further significant civilian casualties in the coming months are likely," the human rights report concluded.

The U.N. tolls are based on witness testimonies, military and local leader interviews, hospital visits, and photographic and film evidence as well as media and secondary-source reports.

The latest report said 200 civilians have been killed since the start of the year in 40 air strikes by pro-government forces. May was especially bloody, with 63 civilian deaths in one aerial bombardment and a total of 81 deaths over the month.

"While the number of deadly air strike incidents remains low overall, when they do occur they can claim a significant number of lives," the report said.

It said pro-government forces -- who until last year were responsible for the bulk of Afghan civilian deaths -- seemed to have clamped down on "force protection incidents" where civilians are killed after failing to follow instructions when nearing military convoys, sites or checkpoints.