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The New York Times

Civilian Death Toll Rises in Afghanistan

By Sharon Otterman
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The widening war in Afghanistan between Taliban militants and American-allied Afghan forces is taking an increasingly heavy toll on civilians, with more than 1,000 killed in the first six months of 2009, up from 818 during the same period in 2008, according to a United Nations report released Friday.

Explosions and suicide attacks carried out by antigovernment forces, including the Taliban, caused the majority of the civilian deaths, killing some 600 civilians during the period, the report said. Of the approximately 300 deaths attributed to pro-government forces, some two-thirds were caused by American airstrikes, the report said.

The main increase in deaths came from the increasingly lethal tactics of the antigovernment insurgents, including improvised explosive devices, suicide attacks and assassinations, the report said. While in 2007, the insurgents were responsible for 46 percent of the civilian deaths in the war, they are now accountable for 60 percent of them. Almost a third of the country is now directly affected by insurgent activity, the report said, and that area is steadily spreading.

The report noted increased efforts by international and American forces in Afghanistan to reduce the number of civilian casualties, such as by creating a special system to track such deaths, and said that the number of civilians inadvertently being shot at checkpoints had been reduced.

The high number of deaths caused by airstrikes, however, as well as reports of excessive force used by joint Afghan and international patrols in search-and-seizure raids, remain sources of concern, the report said.

Afghan civilians are increasingly finding themselves in the center of the deepening operations to rout the Taliban militants. More of the fighting is taking place in civilian areas as the government seeks to quell the insurgency, the report said.

The deaths caused by pro-government operations are leading to “a strong feeling of anger and disappointment among the Afghan general public,” the report warned, adding that they are “undermining support for the continued presence of the international military forces, and the international community generally.”