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The killing fields of Afghanistan

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Every Afghan civilian death diminishes the coalition's cause, General David Petraeus told troops in a tactical directive issued last week. By that standard alone, yesterday's UN report on civilian casualties in the first half of this year makes grim reading for the new commander of Nato forces. True, it vindicates the strategy of his predecessor, General Stanley McChrystal, in limiting air strikes, often at the cost of increasing the danger to troops fighting their way out of an ambush. The report says there has been a 30% drop in the number of deaths and injuries caused by foreign forces. It also attests to the increasing ruthlessness of the Taliban. Afghan deaths have soared as a result of homemade bombs and political assassinations. No one is too young to be killed. A seven-year-old boy accused of spying for the government was publicly hanged.

But civilian deaths are not the Taliban's problem, despite the guidelines they issue to their fighters. They are Petraeus's, because they strike at the heart of Nato's claims that it is there for the protection of the civilian population. In two unusually acerbic passages, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (Unama) said that the operation Nato launched in February to clear the Taliban out of the poppy-growing fields of the Nadi Ali and Marja districts of central Helmand had not resulted in a increased protection of the local population – 29 of whom had died at Nato's hands, 32 at the Taliban's, and 13 at the hands of unknown killers.

Instead, the completion of combat operations in Marja only heralded a wave of Taliban abductions, assassinations and executions. Unama then quoted one elder in Kandahar, where a similar operation has been contemplated, but until now postponed. He complained there were too many "meetings in name", by which he meant PR exercises which could be filmed but where the advice given by people like him could be safely ignored. The Taliban watched the same television pictures sitting in Pakistan, so that when they saw him seated next to the governor, the elder could only conclude: "First I risk my life and then I am insulted."

Quite why the Taliban are targeting more civilians is a matter of speculation. One theory is that a new generation of jihadis has been forged by the US drones attacks which have decapitated the leadership in Waziristan. These fighters are even more ideologically driven than the previous generation and less troubled by the fate of apostates. Another is that attacking teachers, doctors and tribal leaders is the surest way of telling the community as a whole that you are here to stay. To borrow Nato's jargon, the Taliban may just have found their own way of shaping the environment for their military operations. Assassinations running at a rate of seven a week are a powerful disincentive to collaboration. The Taliban frequently attaches notes to the bodies of civilians, warning others of the same fate. However, a minibus hitting a mine laid by the Taliban, in which nine passengers including two children die, is unlikely to spark a local backlash against them. If anything, Nato is blamed for having brought the battlefield to their doorstep. So that if Petraeus is waiting for a rerun of the events which saved his bacon in Iraq (when al-Qaida's brutal tactics sparked a rebellion among the Sunni tribesmen), he may have to wait some time.

One way or another, civilians are becoming the primary target of this conflict. The escalation of the campaign ordered by Barack Obama last year has only spread the zone of conflict, not doused it. It shows no signs of securing the loyalty of the Pashtun in the time limits Mr Obama has set himself. It may be true that in decreasing the casualties that they cause, US forces are at last learning how to fight this war, but like Vietnam, they have run out of road back home.