

## **Afghans Dispute NATO Casualty Figures**

**Author:** [Khan Mohammad Danishju](#)

No meeting of minds at conference to discuss deaths and injuries caused by NATO and Taleban.

The shooting of 16 civilians in the southern Kandahar province came a week after anger erupted at a Kabul conference when participants disputed NATO civilian casualty figures and accused western forces of failing to punish the perpetrators.

The March 4 conference held at the headquarters of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, was a chance for Afghan politicians and security experts to air long-held grievances about the actions of western troops in the country.

The March 11 killings, carried out by a US staff sergeant who then turned himself in, are likely to intensify the sense of resentment. (For more, see **Taleban Backlash Feared After Shooting Rampage.**)

Both NATO and UNAMA insist the Taleban and other insurgent groups are responsible for the overwhelming majority of civilian casualties.

In a report issued in February, UNAMA said civilian casualties in Afghanistan had risen annually for the last five years. It said insurgents caused 77 per cent of the 3,021 civilian deaths in 2011, often through improvised explosive devices, IEDs. ISAF troops and Afghan government forces were responsible for 410 deaths, while in a further 279 cases of civilian deaths in the conflict, it had proved impossible to determine who was responsible.

Speaking at the conference, Lieutenant-General Adrian Bradshaw, deputy commander of ISAF, cited NATO figures recording that insurgent groups were to blame for 958 – or 93 per cent – of the 1,030 civilian casualties counted in the previous four months.

The remaining 72 included casualties inflicted by ISAF and also by Afghan security forces when operating alongside NATO troops. The ISAF total of 1,030 does not include casualties cause by Afghan government forces when they are operating on their own.

General John Allen, commander of ISAF and US forces in Afghanistan said the figures showed that protecting civilians was a top priority for the NATO-led force.

“Everything ISAF does is focused on providing security for the people of Afghanistan. We have worked hard to take extensive measures to prevent civilian casualties, and those efforts are getting results,” he told the conference.

Some of those at the event greeted such assertions with scorn, and the conference exposed the deepening rift between western troops and their Afghan allies.

Haji Amanullah Azimi, a member of the Meshrano Jirga, the upper house of Afghanistan’s parliament, angrily dismissed ISAF’s figures.

“How can we believe the numbers you are presenting?” he said. “The number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan has reached its highest level yet, and we have always heard from you during the past decade that they will decrease. Unfortunately, we’ve observed no reduction, and no change in your tactics.”

Bradshaw told Azimi that ISAF regretted every civilian death, and that western troops were also paying a high price.

“Our forces are also killed in Afghanistan, and they have families and children, too,” he said.

Asked about ISAF’s figures after the conference, one participant told IWPR they were laughable.

“The foreigners think the Afghan people will blindly accept whatever they say,” he said on condition of anonymity. “They need to understand that even children in this country know what they are up to.”

Tension continued on the fringes of the conference when Lal Gul, head of the Afghanistan Human Rights Organisation, an independent pressure group, confronted Bradshaw and told him Afghans and foreigners were dying for nothing.

“Your casualties and the casualties of the Afghan people are useless,” Gul told Bradshaw.

He said western counter-insurgency efforts could only succeed if they were directed across the border in

Pakistan, America's nominal ally.

"The terrorist centres are in Pakistan and the leaders of the Taleban live there," Gul said. "Those centres must be attacked, but you look for terrorists in the villages of Afghanistan. Is this fair?"

Bradshaw did not address Gul's criticisms, although he told the conference that ISAF was still responsible for too many civilian casualties and pledged to reduce the figure to zero.

During the conference, Gul also disputed ISAF's figure of just seven per cent of the casualties being attributable to government and international forces, though he agreed that insurgents were killing more civilians.

On the figures, he said civilian casualties actually peaked between 2001 and 2007, but appeared to rise after that because of better reporting.

Allen disputed this, and attributed the current rise to increased Taleban activity.

Several participants urged ISAF to punish personnel who caused civilian casualties.

In a statement following the killings, Allen promised a thorough investigation and said he was "absolutely dedicated" to ensuring the individual responsible would be brought to justice.

But several members of parliament told the conference that ISAF personnel who had killed civilians accidentally had gone unpunished.

Wagma Safi told the conference that no one had been punished after NATO airstrikes in recent months killed children in the eastern province of Kunar, which she represents.

Kabul parliamentarian Shokria Barakzai said she believed the casualty rate would fall if perpetrators were held properly accountable.

Major General Afzal Aman, director of operations at the Afghan defence minister, said ISAF members had been punished for civilian casualties, though he did not elaborate on cases.

In its report, UNAMA urged the Taleban and its allies to end the use of IEDs and stop targeting civilians, attacking mosques and carrying out indiscriminate suicide attacks. It also urged foreign forces to improve transparency, accountability and the procedures for paying compensation to victims.

Taleban spokesman Zabihollah Mojahed told IWPR by phone that the UNAMA figures were skewed in favour of the Americans.

"If UNAMA wants to clarify the issue, it should come and we would be prepared to help them," he said.

Abdol Wahed Taqat, a political analyst and former army general, said it was likely that ISAF inflicted more casualties than it admitted, because of airstrikes carried out in unfamiliar territory and without consulting the Afghan military. In addition, its informants sometimes handed it false intelligence in the hope of prompting attacks on their own enemies.

Another former Afghan general, Nurulhaq Olumi, a defence affairs expert, said it was hard to verify casualty figures as UNAMA and the Afghan interior and defence ministries all produced different numbers.

**Khan Mohammad Danishju is an IWPR-trained reporter in Kabul.**

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