

Examining Civilian Harm Tracking and Casualty Recording in Afghanistan

Documenting and analyzing civilian harm is a critical component of mitigating the impact of armed conflict on civilians. It also provides recognition to civilians who are injured, killed, lose property or are otherwise harmed, and provides critical information to conflict parties, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, and others who seek to prevent and address harm.

Civilian harm tracking and casualty recording are two distinct approaches to documenting civilian harm and are increasingly recognized as emerging practice by states, conflict parties, international organizations, and civil society. In Afghanistan, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan Human Rights Unit (UNAMA HR) use these respective approaches.

The Center for Civilians in Conflict and the Every Casualty Programme at Oxford Research Group (ECP) examine these practices in complementary reports. In *Civilian Harm Tracking: Analysis of ISAF Efforts in Afghanistan*, the Center addresses the creation, implementation, and evolution of ISAF's Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell (CCTC) and identifies lessons for future such mechanisms. ECP examines casualty recording within the UN system, and particularly the work of UNAMA Human Rights Unit in [The UN and Casualty Recording: Good Practice and the Need for Action](#). The briefing paper highlights evidence of the usefulness of these practices and recommendations for future use.

Definitions

Civilian harm tracking is an internal process by which an armed actor can systematically gather data on civilian deaths and injuries, property damage or destruction, and other instances of civilian harm caused by its operations. As a best practice, senior-level analysts should analyze the data to identify trends and inform tactical and operational decision-making to reduce civilian harm. The data should also be used to respond properly to civilians harmed during lawful operations through culturally appropriate dignifying assistance. Where there are allegations of violations, these should be investigated under separate legal mechanisms. In Afghanistan, ISAF implemented components of civilian casualty tracking, including documentation of civilian death or injury in relation to its operations.

Casualty recording is the process of documenting—in a systematic and continuous manner—every individual killed or injured in armed violence and can be undertaken by civil society, intergovernmental organizations, or state actors. Casualty recording strives for a complete and transparent record, including detailed information about casualties and the incidents in which individuals were harmed. The availability of casualty records has proven useful to the programs and advocacy of humanitarian and human rights organizations, as well as to state and intergovernmental actors. Data from casualty recording has been used for humanitarian response planning, transitional justice, accountability processes, and memorialization efforts. In Afghanistan, UNAMA HR implemented casualty recording to record conflict-related deaths and injuries of civilians only, including harm caused by all parties.

Both practices create a specific forum in which information regarding suspected or confirmed civilian casualties can be recognized and addressed.

Casualty Tracking and Recording in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, civilian casualty tracking by ISAF and civilian casualty recording by UNAMA HR informed the respective organizations of the conflict's impact on civilians, enabled the organizations to crosscheck data, and fostered conversation regarding changes to operations to prevent and mitigate civilian harm.

ISAF - Civilian Casualty Tracking in Practice

ISAF leadership created the CCTC in 2008 because of the need to address allegations of ISAF-caused civilian casualties. The initial mechanism was modest, requiring little planning and reallocation of resources. A small CCTC staff collected and centralized data reported from the field, using the data to attempt to verify civilian casualty allegations and keep ISAF leadership informed. By late 2009, the CCTC amassed enough data to analyze it for trends. This aggregated data was used for reports and recommendations addressing civilian casualty mitigation for ISAF leadership.

The CCTC's work proved valuable, prompting ISAF in 2011 to expand the mechanism into the Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team. The expansion gave the mechanism more personnel, resources, and responsibility, including increased engagement with civil society on civilian casualty concerns. Its data was used to influence recommendations for tactical directives and pre-deployment training.

In implementing the CCTC and subsequent CCMT, ISAF repeatedly emphasized the importance of tracking, helping make it a priority down the chain of command. Coordination across ISAF was necessary in order to collect standardized data that could be usefully analyzed. Accounting for civilian casualties caused by special operations forces or clandestine agencies posed an extra challenge for ISAF's transparency and messaging efforts. Finally, building trust was a vital part of bolstering relationships with groups outside of ISAF that could crosscheck data and help defuse false allegations. The UNAMA HR bi-annual Protection of Civilians report proved useful for comparing the organizations' data.

UNAMA HR - Civilian Casualty Recording in Practice

UNAMA HR began systematically recording and analyzing data on civilian casualties in 2007-8. The work significantly expanded in 2008, when the Human Rights Unit deemed that documenting only human rights violations was not enough to address all civilian harm in the conflict, or to respond to public concern about civilian casualties.

Civilian casualty recording is now part of UNAMA HR's Protection of Civilians priority area of work, which also involves broader monitoring of the conflict's impact on human rights protection.

UNAMA HR's actions based on casualty data have contributed to the assistance of victims of conflict, humanitarian response, and—through public and private dialogue—to encouraging parties to the conflict to review and revise policy and operational practices, to reduce casualties. Most of UNAMA HR's private advocacy has been with international forces, though advocacy increasingly targets Afghan national forces as they take on more

responsibility. UNAMA HR also conducts public dialogue with opposition forces. When UNAMA HR began casualty recording and advocacy in 2007, ISAF was not centrally tracking harm caused by its actions. Among other factors, this made constructive engagement around allegations of ISAF-caused harm more challenging. The development of UNAMA HR and ISAF's relationship means that they are now able to discuss incidents in a constructive manner, using the results of their respective investigations.

UNAMA HR's work conforms to several principles of good practice in casualty recording including: striving for impartiality; having a systematic, documented casualty-recording procedure with confirmation and quality control mechanisms; and being transparent about methodology and definitions.

Future Application

In his 2013 report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (POC), the UN Secretary-General called for the UN to establish a common system for civilian casualty recording as part of the broader monitoring of abuses and violations. Based on ECP's interviews, individuals working within the UN system see casualty recording serving several objectives. These range from operational planning to advocacy, and across humanitarian, human rights, and post-conflict and development priorities. When the UN can impartially engage in casualty recording during armed conflict, it can complement and may often provide greater value to civilian protection and assistance activities than a state-run casualty-recording mechanism alone.

In recognition of the dramatic impact civilian casualties have on operational and strategic goals, various conflict parties are increasingly consider adopting mechanisms for civilian harm tracking, such as the Civilian Casualty Tracking, Analysis, and Response Cell by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). In his 2013 POC report, the UN Secretary General noted the utility of such tools for parties to conflict and for UN peacekeeping missions involved in "offensive peacekeeping operations."

We recommend the UN, conflict parties, and other actors consider implementing both civilian harm tracking and casualty recording. Based on the case of Afghanistan, we believe having both mechanisms in conflict environments can help facilitate evidence-based discussions between military and non-military actors, supporting more effective action to protect and assist civilians.

Recommendations

We recommend the following practices when undertaking civilian harm tracking and casualty recording:

- Have a clear objective in relation to civilian protection or assistance;
- Adopt a clear methodology, outlining the necessary quality, and detail required from data;
- As part of the methodology, develop documented and enforced procedures;
- Apply transparency for all definitions and procedures;
- Use robust information management tools that can incorporate all information relating to an incident;

- Ensure that new information or updates are incorporated into previously investigated cases;
- Have adequately trained and dedicated staff;
- Promptly investigate incidents, to avoid information loss and ensure timely action to protect and assist civilians;
- Have the capability to analyze data and be able to respond to trends in harm during conflict;
- Communicate and collaborate with other organizations both to gather information and to take joint action to reduce harm; and
- Seek support for the mechanism, both from within the institution housing it and from external collaborators.

The importance of sustaining tracking and recording mechanisms not only during but also after hostilities—to ensure harm is appropriately addressed—cannot be overemphasized. Although ISAF is drawing down in Afghanistan, documenting and addressing civilian harm remains no less necessary until violence ends. Development of Afghan security forces’ capacities in tracking and mitigating harm should continue. Similarly, UNAMA HR’s systematic casualty recording must continue to be resourced. Should UNAMA be wound down or asked to leave, the legacy of its casualty recording and possibilities for handover to a national capacity should be considered. Comprehensive information about casualties is relevant to identifying the fate of the missing, building a historical record, and as part of transitional justice.

* * * * *

Civilian Harm Tracking: Analysis of ISAF Efforts in Afghanistan (May 2014) was researched and written by Jennifer Keene, consultant with the Center for Civilians in Conflict and edited by Sahr Muhammedally, Senior Legal Advisor with the Center. *The UN and Casualty recording: Good Practice and the Need for Action* (April 2014) was researched and written by Jacob Beswick, Policy Officer and Elizabeth Minor, Senior Research Officer, of the Every Casualty programme at the Oxford Research Group.

Center for Civilians in Conflict works to make warring parties more responsible to civilians before, during, and after armed conflict. We are advocates who believe no civilians should be ignored and advisors who provide practical solutions to preventing and responding to civilian harm. www.civiliansinconflict.org, Contact: Sahr Muhammedally, sahr@civiliansinconflict.org

The **Every Casualty programme at Oxford Research Group** is committed to the principle that every life lost to armed violence should be properly recognised. For this to become possible, every casualty of armed violence, throughout the world, must be promptly recorded, correctly identified, and publicly acknowledged. To bring this closer to fulfillment, the programme is developing an improved understanding of the range of casualty recording practices, advocating for their implementation, and providing guidance for good practice. www.everycasualty.org Contact: Elizabeth Minor, elizabeth@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk