

Civilian Harm Tracking: Analysis of ISAF Efforts in Afghanistan

Implemented in 2008, the Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell (CCTC) was created within the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan to collect data on civilian casualties. The first large-scale civilian casualty tracking by a warring party, the mechanism evolved in size, responsibility, and recognition as an integral part of ISAF's civilian casualty mitigation efforts.

Civilian Harm Tracking

Tracking of civilian harm is a vital component of civilian harm mitigation. Civilian harm tracking is an internal process by which conflict parties can systematically gather data on civilian deaths and injuries, property damage or destruction, and other instances of civilian harm caused by its operations. Senior-level analysts should analyze the data to identify trends and inform tactical and operational decision-making. The data should then be used to respond properly to harmed civilians through culturally appropriate dignifying gestures and assistance. Allegations of unlawful harm are investigated under separate legal mechanisms. Warring parties are increasingly using components of this civilian harm tracking, analysis, and response process.

In Afghanistan, ISAF implemented a civilian casualty tracking cell, which documented civilian death or injury. While ISAF's mechanism did not contain all the components of a comprehensive tracking, analysis and response process, its commendable efforts highlight important lessons and considerations for warring parties in the future.

Case Study: ISAF Civilian Casualty Tracking

ISAF leadership created the Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell (CCTC) in 2008 because of a 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 such as date and time of the incident, place and type of operation, and the numbers of civilians killed or injured. CCTC staff used the data to attempt to verify civilian casualty allegations and to keep ISAF leadership informed. By late 2009, the CCTC had amassed enough information to examine the data 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 (CCMT). 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 found that building trust was a vital part of bolstering relationships with groups outside ISAF that could crosscheck data and help diffuse false allegations. By repeatedly making clear that tracking civilian casualties was a priority, ISAF leadership helped guarantee its importance down the chain of command, and made clear that coordination across ISAF was necessary for collecting standardized data that could be usefully analyzed. Accounting for civilian casualties caused by actors outside of conventional forces posed a challenge for ISAF's transparency and messaging efforts. Each of these challenges may be relevant to future warring parties as they create mechanisms tailored to their operational needs.

Lessons Identified

1. Civilian casualty tracking must be backed by sincere attention to mitigating and reducing civilian harm, not solely collecting data.

ISAF recognized that Afghan civilian casualties harmed ISAF's ultimate mission of protecting and supporting the Afghan population. Discrepancies in, and often lack of, internal ISAF reporting on civilian casualties also presented an operational distraction to ISAF's efforts. Creating a mechanism to track civilian casualties was an important step in mitigating these casualties and limiting their negative impact on the mission. Data collection itself does not mitigate or prevent civilian casualties. Instead, analyzing and using the data to inform decisions makes the gathering of this data valuable.

2. Civilian casualty tracking does not require tremendous resources but does require sustained attention and assertion of value.

ISAF implemented civilian casualty tracking with negligible resources and expanded the mechanism by incorporating and re-hatting capabilities already available within ISAF. However, useful data gathered by tracking relies on individuals reporting at all levels. Sustained effort and emphasis by ISAF leadership was crucial in communicating the value and importance of collecting data throughout the organization, and in keeping attention on the need to mitigate and prevent civilian casualties. Troops at the tactical level or peacekeepers in-theater need to know why tracking, investigating and responding to all civilian harm is critical to their mission.

3. Data collection itself does not have to be complicated, but reporting must be standardized and the data reported robust enough for deep analysis.

ISAF's civilian casualty tracking did not require multiple new reporting chains or new, complicated information-sharing processes up the chain of command. But all levels of hierarchy—from unit levels to command—need to work with the same clear definitions. These definitions can and should then be used to communicate and crosscheck data with external organizations. Likewise, the data needs to have enough detail to allow subject matter experts and statisticians to mine the data for root-causes of civilian harm, and to pass that analysis on to commanders and planners to then prevent future civilian harm.

4. To be most useful, a tracking mechanism should be in place before a mission begins.

ISAF's effort to create the first-ever tracking cell in a combat zone is commendable. However, it initially lacked a comprehensive framework and common philosophical approach. The framework

could have existed from the start if the mechanisms had been created before operations began, rather than evolving with them. Future mechanisms should be created in the planning phases of combat operations, to fully ground common definitions and procedures and make tracking, analysis and incorporating civilian harm lessons learned as a mission priority from the outset.

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