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Continuing civilian toll in Afghanistan poses dilemma for U.S.

By **Leo Shane III**, Stars and Stripes
Midwest edition, Thursday, April 22, 2010

WASHINGTON — Taliban fighters in Afghanistan killed nearly three times more civilians than U.S. and NATO forces last year. But, in a war of perceptions, it's the International Security Assistance Force that's scrambling to prove it's doing everything possible not to kill innocent bystanders.

On Wednesday, NATO forces acknowledged that they gunned down four civilians whose car traveled too close to a military patrol in Khost province, further inflaming tensions in the country. The incident came a week after U.S. soldiers fired on a civilian commuter bus outside Kandahar, killing four Afghan civilians and wounding 18 others, triggering a wave of anti-American protests throughout Afghanistan's major cities.

The top United Nations envoy in Afghanistan called the bus incident part of a "disturbing trend" of civilian casualties during recent international military operations. On April 6, four civilians were killed in a firefight between insurgents and NATO forces. And in February, a night raid on a family compound outside Gardez by U.S. Special Forces resulted in the deaths of five civilians, including two pregnant women, a teenage girl, a local police chief and his brother.

"All efforts must be undertaken to ensure [this trend] is reversed," said Staffan de Mistura, head of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

Still more controversy about civilian deaths in Afghanistan is looming. Wikileaks, a whistleblower Web site that posts sensitive government and corporate documents, is promising to soon release a video of the controversial bombing last May of a compound in Farah province, where U.S. officials acknowledge 30 civilians were killed but U.N. officials have estimated more than 90 civilian deaths.

Earlier this month, Wikileaks posted decrypted video of a 2007 helicopter strike in Iraq that killed two Reuters journalists as well as suspected Iraqi combatants. Defense officials said the heavily edited video mischaracterized the U.S. mission, but the incident raised new questions about how effectively troops can protect civilians in a war zone.

Defense Department officials are clearly concerned.

Earlier this month, Defense Secretary Robert Gates conceded to reporters that civilian casualties in Afghanistan still pose a strategic and public relations challenge to the military's success. And in an essay for an internal ISAF newsletter in February, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, reminded troops to be constantly mindful of civilians in and around the battlefield.

"Without firing a weapon, the enemy can set back our efforts significantly," McChrystal wrote.

Last summer, McChrystal issued sweeping new guidelines emphasizing the need to limit civilian casualties in order to gain popular support for the war effort.

"This is different from conventional combat," McChrystal wrote, "and how we operate will determine the outcome more than traditional measures, like capture of terrain or attrition of enemy forces.

"We must avoid the trap of winning tactical victories — but suffering strategic defeats — by causing civilian casualties or excessive damage, and thus alienating the people," McChrystal added.



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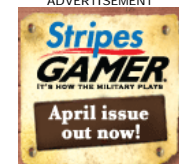
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The results since then in Afghanistan have been mixed. According to the U.N., civilian casualties at the hands of international and pro-government forces dropped by 28 percent from 2008 to 2009.

But in the first three months of 2010, NATO troops accidentally killed 72 civilians, up from 29 during the same period in 2009, according to ISAF.

According to the U.N. Mission in Afghanistan, 2,412 Afghan civilians were killed in fighting last year. Improvised explosive devices and suicide attacks were the largest cause of death, with 1,054 civilians killed, and Taliban-led attacks accounted for more than two-thirds of the total.

In the Arghandab Valley, Maj. Scott Brannon, the operations officer for the 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, said soldiers right now spend "90 percent of our time planning nonlethal actions and key leader engagements, rather than on shooting bullets."

Brian Katulis, a senior fellow at the liberal Center for American Progress think tank, said that's the conflict: U.S. troops in Afghanistan have to be wary of local perceptions of their effort, but at the same time remain vigilant against any threats.

"There is a risk of elevating expectations, promising to keep the civilian population safe while still fighting," Katulis said. "We expect troops to be able to flip a switch, shift from killing insurgents one day to providing basic services and acting like a social worker the next."

In many cases that's impossible, especially when Taliban forces use civilians as a shield.

"It's quite nice in theory," Katulis said. "But theory doesn't always match up with reality."

U.S. commanders in Afghanistan note that while incidents such as the bus shooting in Kandahar have become flash points in major cities, Afghans in rural villages tend to be more parochial in their outlook. Unless U.S. forces have killed or wounded one of their neighbors, it's not a major complaint in those communities.

Still, Lt. Col. Brian Christmas, commander of 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, emphasized to Marjah elders last month that while his forces wanted to kill as few people as possible, anyone working alongside the Taliban will be dealt with harshly.

"Every time they point a gun at me, I will shoot them," he said. "Tell them to put their guns down and come back home."

Malou Innocent, an Afghanistan analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, said U.S. troops in the war zone tell her that the added attention to civilian casualties creates additional stress in those split-second combat zone decisions.

"You can't fight a politically correct war," she said. "We need to stop overemphasizing the idea that we can do more to minimize civilian casualties. Every time we say that the Taliban uses it as leverage, pointing to any incident and saying 'See, they say they'll protect you and then they don't.'"

For now military commanders say there's no plan to change that message, even if it has been twisted into insurgent propaganda. Lawmakers said they still support McChrystal's counterinsurgency approach as well.

"Just because it's not easy, that doesn't mean we shouldn't try," said Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee's tactical intelligence subcommittee.

"From a strategic standpoint, it's essential that we wage a war of ideas [in Afghanistan] too. We can't remove all the terrorists from the battlefield. So strategic communication becomes an essential part of that wider struggle."

And despite the latest incidents, no hearings are planned on the issue before the House Armed Services Committee.

"This is war," said committee chairman Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo. "Unfortunately, sometimes this happens in war."

Reporter Drew Brown contributed to this story from Afghanistan.

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