

## UN renews call for protection of Afghan civilians, after casualty figures spike in 2016

6 February 2017 – Attacks in Afghanistan by the Taliban, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) and pro-Government troops killed or injured more children and other civilians in 2016 than at any other time since the United Nations began keeping records, it was announced today.

According to the new UN report, some 11,418 civilian casualties were confirmed last year – including 2,589 children – an increase of 24 per cent since the previous high in 2015.

Releasing the casualty figures at a press conference in the Afghan capital of Kabul, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Tadamichi Yamamoto, called the killing and maiming of thousands of Afghan civilians “deeply harrowing and largely preventable.”

“All parties to the conflict must take immediate concrete measures to protect the ordinary Afghan men, women and children whose lives are being shattered,” said Mr. Yamamoto, who is also the head of the UN Assistance Mission in the country (UNAMA).

A breakdown of the figures shows that 3,498 people were killed, among them 923 children, and 7,920 civilians were injured, including 2,589 children.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, said the casualty figures painted a picture of the most vulnerable sectors of society paying the highest price.



*Source: UNAMA Annual Report 2016 Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*

“Children have been killed, blinded, crippled – or inadvertently caused the death of their friends – while playing with unexploded ordnance that is negligently left behind by parties to the conflict,” Mr. Zeid said. His Office, known by the acronym OHCHR, works annually with UNAMA to produce the report.

In addition to figures, the report includes excerpt of interviews with survivors of violence.

One of the interviews is with a mother who survived a mortar attack during a ground engagement in the Bala Buluk district of Farah province, in the western part of Afghanistan.



Aftermath of an explosion in the centre of Kabul, Afghanistan, on the corner of Passport Lane and the Indian Embassy. Photo: UNAMA/Jawad Jalali (file)

“It was the day before Ramadan when a number of Taliban entered my village,” she told UNAMA during a telephone interview in June 2016. “While we were walking to my husband’s tricycle, a mortar shell landed nearby. My mother-in-law and I hit the ground injured and my newborn baby was hit by shrapnel in the chest. He died after a few minutes.”

UN investigators found that anti-Government forces, mainly the Taliban, were responsible for almost two-thirds of the casualties, while pro-Government forces were responsible for almost one-quarter. In addition, casualties caused by airstrikes carried out by Afghan and international forces nearly doubled since 2015.

**AUDIO:** Civilian casualties in Afghanistan reached record levels last year, according to the UN Mission there, UNAMA. *Credit: UN News*

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## [UN urges renewed fight to end female genital mutilation as populations grow in countries where practice occurs](#)

6 February 2017 – Female genital mutilation denies women and girls their dignity and causes needless pain and suffering, with consequences that endure for a lifetime and can even be fatal, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has said, stressing that the UN Sustainable Development Agenda promises an end to this practice by 2030.

“On this Day of Zero Tolerance, let us build on positive momentum and commit to intensifying global action against this heinous human rights violation for the sake of all affected women and girls, their communities and our common future,” the Secretary-General said in a message on the International Day, marked annually on 6 February to strengthen momentum towards ending the practice of female genital mutilation, globally recognized as a violation of the human rights of girls and women.

Despite a significant overall decline in the prevalence of the practice, widely referred to by the acronym FGM, the United Nations warns that this progress is likely to be offset as the population grows in countries where female genital mutilation is practiced, and without beefed up efforts to eliminate it, more girls will be cut.

In a blog post on the occasion of the International, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka,

the Executive Director of UN Women, wrote: "The cutting and sewing of a young child's private parts so that she is substantially damaged for the rest of her life, has no sensation during sex except probably pain, and may well face further damage when she gives birth, is to many an obvious and horrifying violation of that child's rights."

"It is a kind of control that lasts a lifetime," she continued. "It makes a mockery of the idea of any part being truly private and underlines the institutionalized way in which decisions over her own body have been taken from that girl – one of some 200 million currently."

The main reason that FGM continues – as it does in some 30 countries across three continents – is out of a desire for social acceptance and to avoid social stigma, according to a 2016 report by the Secretary-General .

"The hidden nature of the support for ending the practice slows down the process of abandonment," the authors wrote.

#### ***World must speed up progress to end female genital mutilation by 2030***

Underlining that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 and now heading their second year of implementation, recognized the close connection between FGM, gender inequality, and development – and reignited global action to end the practice by 2030, heads of UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UN Population Fund (UNFPA) called for faster action to achieve this commitment.

"It means creating greater access to support services for those at risk of undergoing FGM and those who have survived it," said UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake and UNFPA Executive Director Babatunde Osotimehin in a joint statement.

"It also means driving greater demand for those services, providing families and communities with information about the harm FGM causes – and the benefits to be gained by ending it," they added.

Calling on governments to enact and enforce laws and policies that protect the rights of girls and women and prevent FGM, they urged everyone to make this the generation that abolishes FGM once and for all – and in doing so, helps create a healthier, better world for all.

UNFPA, jointly with UNICEF, leads the largest global programme to accelerate the abandonment of FGM. The programme currently focuses on 17 African countries and also supports regional and global initiatives.

The theme of the 2017 edition of the International Day is: 'Building a solid and interactive bridge between Africa and the world to accelerate ending FGM by 2030.'

#### ***Colombia: Bringing a hidden practice to light***

In Colombia, for example, some members of the Emberá, a historically

impoverished and marginalized indigenous group, continue the practice.

The practice is done quietly, so there are few reliable statistics. The Colombian National Indigenous Organization (ONIC) estimates that two out of three Emberá women have been cut, according to information used by the UNFPA.

But in 2007, after two girls died from infections caused by FGM, some women tribal members began being more vocal about the practice.

“In the beginning, it was really difficult,” Solani Zapata told UNFPA. “Nobody wanted to talk about the subject.”

Slowly people began to open up, leading to conversations about related issues, including gender-based violence.

Girls who undergo the practice are less likely to finish school, have limited formal employment prospects and are more likely to be married to an older man and become pregnant early in life.

The practice has since been abandoned in many communities.

“We don’t do it here anymore,” said Amanda Guasiruma Gaisama, in Valle del Cauca. “The adults know that if it’s done here and something happens to the girl, there are consequences... We know it is not normal for a girl, even if it’s part of a tradition.”

To raise awareness about the negative impact of FGM, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) is holding Facebook Live programming all day today. Watch live at [facebook.com/UNFPA](https://facebook.com/UNFPA).

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## [UN Middle East envoy ‘concerned’ over scheduled vote on Israel’s settlement regularisation bill](#)

6 February 2017 – The top United Nations Middle East envoy today expressed concern about the scheduled vote by the Knesset, Israel’s legislative body, on a bill that would “legalize” Israeli settlements on privately-owned Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank.

“I am concerned by the scheduled vote on the so-called ‘Regularisation Bill’ as it would enable the continued use of privately-owned Palestinian land for Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank,” said the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov, in a statement.

“If adopted into law, it will have far reaching legal consequences for

Israel and greatly diminish the prospects for Arab-Israeli peace,&#8221 Mr. Mladenov added, noting that the bill has been deemed unconstitutional by the Attorney General of Israel and is in contravention of international law.

&#8220I urge Israeli legislators to reconsider this move,&#8221 he stated, stressing that all core issues should be resolved between the parties through direct negotiations on the basis of relevant Security Council resolutions and mutual agreements.

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## [Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state could amount to crimes against humanity – UN special adviser](#)

6 February 2017 – The scale of violence against the Rohingya community in Myanmar's Rakhine state documented in a recent United Nations human rights report is a level of dehumanization and cruelty that is &#8220revolting and unacceptable,&#8221 the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide said today, underlining the Government's responsibility to ensure that populations are protected.

In a statement, Special Adviser Adama Dieng said the flash report issued last week by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) gave further credibility to allegations that security forces were committing serious human rights violations against civilians in northern Rakhine state from the very beginning of the recent escalation of violence, which was precipitated by attacks on border posts in early October 2016 and the ensuing operations by those forces.

According to the findings contained in the OHCHR report, human rights violations committed by the security forces include mass gang-rape, extra-judicial killings &#8211 including of babies and young children, brutal beatings and disappearances.

&#8220If people are being persecuted based on their identity and killed, tortured, raped and forcibly transferred in a widespread or systematic manner, this could amount to crimes against humanity, and in fact be the precursor of other egregious international crimes,&#8221 said Mr. Dieng.

&#8220This must stop right now!&#8221 he declared.

***Current panel not a credible option to undertake new investigation***

Mr. Dieng also expressed concern that the commission previously appointed by the Government to investigate the allegations and which, despite having unhindered access to the region, found no evidence, or insufficient evidence,

of any wrongdoing by Government forces.

[However,] OHCHR, which was not given access to the area, found an overwhelming number of testimonies and other forms of evidence through interviews with refugees who had fled to a neighbouring country, the Special Adviser added. The existing Commission is not a credible option to undertake the new investigation.

I urge that any investigation be conducted by a truly independent and impartial body that includes international observers, he noted, welcoming the Government's commitment to open an immediate probe.

If the Government wants the international community and regional actors to believe in their willingness to resolve the matter, they must act responsibly and demonstrate their sincerity, Mr. Dieng said.

There is no more time to wait. All of this is happening against the background of very deeply rooted and long-standing discriminatory practices and policies against the Rohingya Muslims and a failure to put in place conditions that would support peaceful coexistence among the different communities in Rakhine state, he concluded.

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## Civilians face 'dire' situation amid ongoing hostilities in eastern Ukraine, UN warns

3 February 2017 – An immediate pause in fighting is needed in Ukraine to prevent more people dying and repair essential services, the United Nations human rights office said today following another night of shelling in the east of the country.

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres also expressed deep concern about the ongoing tensions and intensification of the fighting in eastern Ukraine, according to the UN chief's spokesperson, who said he appealed to all parties to fully observe the ceasefire and allow for immediate humanitarian access.

In the last week, aerial attacks have killed seven people and injured at least 40 more in heavily populated areas, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

"Reports suggest that two hospitals, a polyclinic, a dental clinic, three schools, and a kindergarten were damaged by shelling in Makiivka and Donetsk city, which are controlled by armed groups," OHCHR spokesperson Liz Throssell told reporters at the regular bi-weekly news briefing in Geneva.

She said OHCHR staff in Donetsk heard explosions over five days, from 29 January through the night of 2 February, and on 2 February, “saw a clearly marked ambulance in Donetsk that had been damaged by shrapnel.”

Latest data shows that at least 9,800 civilians and members of armed forces have been killed since the conflict began in mid-April 2014 according to the UN Human Rights Office.

It also warns that sub-zero temperatures have also left civilians even more vulnerable amid the destruction of power lines and disruption to water, electricity and heating networks.

Ms. Throssell explained that critical civilian infrastructure has been damaged, including near Avdiivka, where power lines have been destroyed, disrupting water, electricity and heating supplies. Gas and electricity supplies were also reported to have been affected in Makiivka and other areas under the control of armed groups, including Irmino and parts of Donetsk.

“Both Government forces and armed groups must take all feasible measures to protect the civilian population in the areas under their control, she said, adding: “We remind them that the protection of civilians must be considered the utmost priority and those committing violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law must be held accountable.”