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<http://wireupdate.com/wires/9190/several-civilian-casualties-feared-after-nato-operation-in-northern-afghanistan/>

Several civilian casualties feared after NATO operation in northern Afghanistan

By Monica Lawrence
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KABUL (BNO NEWS) -- Coalition forces are investigating claims of civilian casualties after a mishap during a NATO operation in northern Afghanistan earlier this month, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said on Monday.

ISAF said the allegations of civilian casualties follow an operation in the Talah wa Barfak district of Baghlan province on August 22. The force said an initial joint assessment team composed of representatives from the ministries of interior, defense, and ISAF reported that several rounds from coalition helicopters fell short, missing the intended target and striking two buildings.

The alliance said the two buildings that were hit were being used as a base of operation, but was not the intended target of the strike. "We are here to protect the people of Afghanistan," said U.S. Army Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez. "Civilian casualties reduce the confidence of the Afghan people and erodes trust placed in us."

"We regret any possible civilian loss of life or injury," said U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Timothy Zadalis. "Our thoughts and concerns are with the family and friends of those civilians who may have been injured or killed."

ISAF initially said 13 insurgents had been killed in the operation, with no civilian casualties, but the assessment team discovered the accidental short rounds during an examination of the air weapons team video. The assessment determined a gun site malfunction was the cause of the errant rounds.

When asked how many civilian casualties are being alleged, U.S. Air Force Major Michael Johnson said: "We don't have precise numbers however several best describes the claims."

"This is exactly why we send assessment teams to look into all civilian casualty allegations," said Zadalis. "We want to be sure we understand exactly what happened, review all information available and set the record straight."

Rodriguez said he ordered an investigation into the accident to find out what happened during the operation and promised to release more information when the investigation has been completed.

Earlier this month, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released its 2010 Mid-Year Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. It revealed that civilian casualties in Afghanistan rose approximately 31 percent in the first semester of 2010.

The Taliban and other insurgent groups, however, are the main causes of these casualties. "Afghan children and women are increasingly bearing the brunt of this conflict. They are being killed and injured in their homes and communities in greater numbers than ever before," said Staffan de Mistura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General.

From January 1 to June 30, UNAMA registered a total of 3,268 civilian casualties including 1,271 deaths and 1,997 injuries. From this amount, insurgents were responsible for 2,477 casualties (76 percent of all casualties, 53 percent more than in 2009) while 386 were attributed to pro-government forces such as NATO. It accounted for 12 percent of all casualties, which is 30 percent less than in 2009.

UNAMA said that the increase in the number of casualties are attributed to the use of a greater number of larger and more sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and the number of civilians assassinated and executed by anti-government forces (which included public executions of children).

"The devastating human impact of these events underscores that, nine years into the conflict, measures to protect Afghan civilians effectively and to minimize the impact of the conflict on basic human rights are more urgent than ever. All those concerned must

do more to protect civilians and comply with their legal obligations not to attack civilians,” said Georgette Gagnon, Director of Human Rights for UNAMA.

IEDs and suicide attacks by insurgents killed 557 Afghans and injured 1,137 in the first six months of 2010. On the other hand, aerial attacks by ISAF remained the most harmful pro-government tactic, causing 69 of the 223 civilian deaths attributed to pro-government forces in the period.

The southern region witnessed more than half of assassinations and executions in Afghanistan, where more than one hundred Afghan civilians were killed in such incidents. These civilians killed included teachers, nurses, doctors, tribal elders, community leaders, provincial and district officials, other civilians including children, and civilians working for international military forces and international organizations.

UNAMA recommended insurgents in its report to stop the use of IEDs as these cause a great number of fatalities. The agency also suggested the Afghan Government to create a public body to lead its response to major civilian casualty incidents and its interaction with international military forces.