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Security Council Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

Posted By [Afghan Mission NY](#) On July 8, 2010 @ 9:49 AM In [Statements by Permanent Representative](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

Statement By

H.E. Mr. Zahir Tanin

Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the United Nations

at the Security Council Debate on
the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

Madam President,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

First, let me congratulate you, Madam President, for assuming the Presidency of the Council for this month, and thank you for convening this meeting. Allow me to also thank the Secretary-General, High Commissioner Pillay and Under Secretary-General Holmes for their briefings today. I want to pay particular tribute to Mr. Holmes, and thank him for his years of service at the United Nations and his extraordinary efforts to protect civilians across the world.

Madam President,

Only last week we met in this chamber to debate the situation in my country, and during my statement then I emphasized the importance of putting the Afghan people at the center of our common efforts, and reengaging them in the reconstruction and stabilization of their country. There can be no legitimacy of efforts or sustainability of progress without the support and partnership of the people themselves.

This awareness has led the Government of Afghanistan, in partnership with the international community, to focus on finding ways to meet the needs and expectations of the people. In this regard, last month, my government convened a consultative Peace Jirga, which brought together all segments of Afghan society in the search for stability and the end of conflict. One thing was very clear; all Afghans desire peace. This is, at heart, the only way to truly protect the Afghan people and stabilize the country. This is my Government's ultimate and most fundamental goal.

Madam President,

In the meantime, civilians continue to pay a staggering price. Over six thousand Afghans were killed and injured last year alone, including women, children and the elderly, and even more are being killed this year. More than half are killed by suicide attacks and IEDs. Mines and other remnants of war continue to claim lives, particularly of children. Over the past years, the Taliban, al Qaeda and their terrorist allies have been responsible for an increasing and overwhelming majority of civilian casualties, and they have embraced assassinations, executions and threats in an attempt to control the population through terror. They show a complete disregard for human life and a willingness to particularly target vulnerable groups, including schoolchildren and teachers. Last month, in a

particularly gruesome example, they hanged a 7-year old child, accusing him of being a government spy. The same day, they attacked a wedding ceremony and killed over forty people in Kandahar.

In addition to the Afghan cost of this conflict, our international friends are also targeted for their efforts to build a stable, prosperous Afghanistan. Attacks on humanitarian workers, United Nations personnel, and those working in education and healthcare, continue to increase. The attack last October on Bakhtar Guest House, which took the lives five UN staff and three others, was just one of several such incidents. In this regard, and on behalf of my Government, let me reiterate our gratitude to the men and women of the United Nations and our international friends, who work in Afghanistan under very difficult circumstances for the sake of the Afghan people and in the pursuit of international peace and security. The Afghan Government and people recognize the critical work that you do in supporting the efforts of my Government and in providing basic services and humanitarian needs for the people. We fully support your efforts in Afghanistan and at the UN to improve security conditions for UN staff.

Madam President,

It is not only the terrorists who are to blame; we also bear an enormous responsibility to safeguard the security of non-combatants. We have achieved remarkable progress on this in the past year. We welcomed steps taken by ISAF's former commander General McChrystal to change their rules of engagement in order to better protect the lives of civilians, and the Security Council noticed the results in their Mission last month. We expect that General Petraeus, as the new commander of ISAF, will continue this emphasis. However, we can, and must, do more to prevent collateral damage and friendly fire, such as in the unfortunate incident yesterday which cost the lives of five Afghan servicemen. Every civilian casualty undermines the belief of the people in the goodwill of the international community and emboldens the enemy. President Karzai continues to raise this issue with our international partners at the highest level, including in his May meetings with President Obama, and we know that our allies share our belief that every civilian death is unacceptable. In addition, my Government is working to build an efficient, effective and responsible army and police force dedicated to the protection of Afghans and the maintenance of security and rule of law. The safety of the Afghan people should be our central concern, and we must continue to work together to be worthy of their trust and confidence in our future efforts.

Madam President,

Afghanistan supports the growing trend of mentioning the protection of civilians in the mandates of ISAF and other military missions. Increasingly, we should measure our success not by abstract measures, but by the concrete improvement in the lives of the people. It is both responsible and necessary that we continue to search for ways to better meet our responsibilities, and bring to Afghans, and others, the peace, justice and stability that is the birthright of all mankind.

Article printed from Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the UN in New York:

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