HOW THE COUNTS
REDUCE THE CASUALTIES

INTRODUCTION

A man, a pregnant women and a child drive towards a checkpoint in Kapisa province, north-east Afghanistan. As they get closer, they don't stop early enough, or maybe they don't stop at all. It's a mistake that costs them their lives. The checkpoint is manned by soldiers of the International Security Assistance Force who, in the stress of the moment, open fire upon civilians inside their car. The car had failed to stop, they said afterwards, "despite repeated warnings".[1]

These unlucky civilians are three of many casualties – both civilian and combatant - who die or get injured through violence every year. Over 526,000 people die violent deaths annually.[2] The numbers of the injured often go uncounted, but are undeniably far higher.

What happens to the memory of these casualties? Will their names, and the circumstances of their death, be documented and recognised? AOAV and the Every Casualty Campaign think they must be. We think that every casualty of armed violence must be promptly recorded, correctly identified, and publicly acknowledged.[3]

There is both a moral and an international legal imperative to keep tallies of casualties of armed violence. Non-combatants are protected under the Geneva Conventions, and political statements about the imperative of protecting civilians abound.

Beyond that, recording casualties helps to understand the dynamics that lead to violence. This better understanding is a first step towards changing the escalation of force. Underpinned by hard facts provided by casualty records, it can help justify a change in policy, in programmes or in behaviour. Such changes can help reduce violence.[4]

This paper highlights four ways in which accurate records of deaths and injuries can help reduce armed violence.

First, casualty records can identify the effects of specific weapons that cause disproportionate harm to civilians. This can result in back-up calls for laws and policies to control them.

A poster in Kabul listing the names of over 300 people allegedly killed by the Taliban in 2001 © Afghan Justice Seekers.

Second, records can expose military or other practices that result in unnecessary and high civilian costs, and provoke changes in such strategies.

Third, a clear picture of casualties of armed violence can help focus scarce resources, such as humanitarian help, to support those most affected.

Fourth, casualty recording is used to strengthen accountability and thereby prevent future violence.

Casualty recording practices have a number of other benefits both for states and UN agencies. They bring for example dignity and recognition to the victims of armed violence. A recent report by Action on Armed Violence "Counting the cost: Casualty recording practices and realities around the world" highlights these benefits and presents a set of recommendations to strengthen casualty recording practices.[5]

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Sporadic counts of military battle deaths in conflict zones have existed for more than two hundred years. The first documented attempts at analysing conflict deaths and injuries were undertaken by doctors and nurses on the battlefields of the nineteenth century.[6]

As wars became larger and deadlier in the twentieth century, casualty-recording efforts became more systematic. In the First and Second World War, militaries, particularly the U.S. army, maintained records for the number of soldiers who went to war, and for those who did not return.[7] These records were used primarily for strategic analysis and planning.[8] But what was not counted, were the dead enemy combatants and civilians.[9]

This all changed during the Vietnam War, when, for the first time, foreign casualties of conflict were also tracked. On a weekly basis, U.S. troops and the American public were supplied with official "body counts" – the numbers of dead U.S. soldiers, U.S. allies, and "communists killed".[10] If at least ten enemies were killed for one dead U.S. soldier, the strategists said, the war was going well. This approach was discarded after being found to produce inflated numbers and a "killing over winning" attitude among soldiers. It also proved counter-productive. It quickly became known that many alleged guerrilla fighters were actually women, children and other unarmed civilians.[11]

Since then, civilian casualty counts by the U.S. military have been withheld from the public. Nevertheless, the U.S. is still perceived as the most comprehensive record-keeper of violence since WWII, or an "exemplary retainer of every single piece of information it is possible to store".[12]

Whether the civilian death toll of wars in the last century has increased is disputed.[13] What has increased is the political significance of the protection of civilians. Today, nations embroiled in violent conflict, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, are at the forefront of emphasising the importance of protecting non-combatants.

This has also happened at a time when more people – including civilians – die in situations of armed violence than in armed conflict.[14] In non-conflict situations, countries usually maintain national homicide counts, which draw on law enforcement and the criminal jus-

tice systems' records.[15] Unlike in conflict situations, the problem here is not so much the complete absence of data, but its quality, accessibility and accuracy.

The recording of injuries due to armed violence, including conflict, has proven to be even more challenging. This is due to very practical considerations: it is easier to define and count dead bodies than to identify and record injuries. Recent practices have begun to highlight the importance of recording both injuries and deaths.[16] "The general narrative tends to equate a reduction in homicides with a decline in the overall rates of armed violence, neglecting the relevance of injuries in this equation. This can be a dangerous practice".[17]

WHAT IS CASUALTY RECORDING?

Recording casualties means documenting the deaths and injuries directly caused by armed violence, and the circumstances in which they occur. Casualty records, ideally, are: comprehensive – aiming to give a complete picture; systematic – using a consistent methodology; and continuous – documented case-by-case, or incident-by-incident.

Casualty recording involves capturing as much information as possible, and as precisely as possible. For example, when did the incident happen and where did it happen? How many people were killed [or injured] and who were they? Were they civilians or combatants? What harmed them - if it was a weapon, which weapon was it? What are the sources testifying that this incident actually happened?[18]

WHO RECORDS CASUALTIES?

The primary responsibility for recording casualties lies with the governments involved in hostilities and on whose territories violence takes place. In fact, states are obliged under international law to record civilian casualties of armed conflict.[19]

In many cases, this works well for military casualties. Armies often track their own casualties according to set procedures, and tallies are believed to be fairly accurate.[20]

The story is different when it comes to civilian casualties. Many governments do not record them systematically. Among those who do, very few publish their records. And, even if they do, they often manipulate

civilian casualty figures.[21] Grossly exaggerated or downplayed figures have appeared in many conflict situations. Parties with an interest in foreign intervention for instance, exaggerate casualty figures to justify their intervention, arguing it could save more lives.[22]

As a result, there is often an "information vacuum" surrounding military and civilian casualties.[23] The record-keepers who fill these gaps – often in a patchwork fashion, collecting bits and pieces of information – are frequently from civil society or international organisations.[24]

HOW ARE CASUALTIES COUNTED?

Casualty recording in situations of armed conflict and in areas with high rates of armed violence means documenting death and injury in contexts where regular monitoring systems break down. Established and systematic civil police and hospital data is frequently unavailable or cannot be trusted.[25] This means that casualty recorders need to find alternative ways of collecting primary information on the civilian victims.

Roughly, their sources can be divided into two types: people and documents.[26] Documentary evidence could come from the media, official government reports, police, military intelligence, hospitals and medico-legal institutions, NGO publications, written testimonies, death certificates, or forensic evidence.[27] Records from people can be from the government, armed groups, families and friends of victims, the media, or charities.[28]

In recent years, new technologies have opened a whole new world of casualty recording techniques. The spread of mobile internet and technology has boosted the capacities for real-time analysis. Text messages, data mining from social media, and instant incident mapping have widened the tool kits of casualty recorders. Despite this new wealth of information, verification of the facts is still hindered by the chaos of conflict and powerful interests concealing evidence.[29]

Museum of "the disappeared" in Rabinal, Guatemala
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HOW CASUALTY RECORDING PREVENTS AND REDUCES ARMED VIOLENCE

Keeping an accurate record of the dead and the injured can reduce violence in very tangible ways. The key is that they enhance the understanding of the dynamics that led the maiming and killings. They paint a better picture of how protection fails civilians.[30] Better understanding is the first step towards changing the lethal patterns. Credible tallies can "inform measures that may protect them [civilians] better in the future".[31]

The following case studies show how. All of them share three characteristics: first, there are records documenting casualties in a systematic, continuous and comprehensive way. Second, the records were used to inform action, be it a change in law, programming or policy. Third, this action has contributed to reducing the violence the casualty records documented.[32]

CASUALTY RECORDING SHOWS THE HUMANITARIAN HARM CAUSED BY WEAPONS

Casualty recording can highlight the humanitarian harm caused by a specific weapon, and serve as a basis to stigmatise, to better control or to even ban this weapon.[33] History shows that such bans on weapons have significantly reduced the casualty rates they cause.

Landmines

Campaigns against landmines in the nineties used medical records to show the devastating impact of landmines on civilians.[34] Medical data showed that about 90% of the world's mine victims were civilians.[35] Farmers harvesting, children playing, and women collecting wood – these were the type of people who bore, and still bear, the brunt of the world's landmine explosions. Casualty data helped solidify the demands for an international ban on landmines, and gave hard facts to the debate.[36] In 1997, the Anti-Personnel Landmine Convention, a milestone treaty in humanitarian disarmament, was adopted. And today, as its implementation progresses, the number of victims decreases. In 2008 and 2009, the annual incidence was down to 11-12 casualties per day - a third of the 32 per day ten years ago.[37]

Cluster munitions

The story of cluster munitions casualties is a similar one. The systems to monitor the implementation of the landmines ban generated data on cluster munitions, too. They found that the lethal impact of clusters is higher than that of landmines.[38] Unlike landmines which are "designed to maim rather than kill", cluster munitions are more likely to kill people.[39] For example, ICRC data from Herat, Afghanistan, showed that, between 2001 and June 2002, cluster bomblets killed 44% of their victims, whereas only 21% of the landmine victims died.[40] As with landmines, the medical data showed that the large majority of victims are civilians. This and similar evidence contributed to a strong case for prohibiting cluster munitions, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions was adopted in 2008. Since then, the number of reported new casualties has decreased from 100 in 2009,[41] to 55 in 2011.[42]

Firearms

Systematic monitoring of injuries and deaths caused by firearms can help to identify, and address, patterns of abuse. A well-known success story occurred in the city of Cali, Colombia in the 1990s. The mayor of the city, concerned by soaring homicide rates, decided to do something about it. His first step was to record the daily violence. In 1993, he established a system called "Development, Security and Peace Programme" which continuously collected data on the incidence of armed violence.[43] This system identified some interesting dynamics, including the fact that most homicides tended to occur on holidays, and that they were concentrated in nightlife areas. In response, the mayor designed a comprehensive programme, which included a ban of firearms on weekends, public holidays and election days, and an aggressive confiscation policy for those who violated it. An evaluation found that, during 1993 and 1994, the homicide rate was 14% lower during times when the ban was in effect, compared to times when it was not.[44]

Future bans: drones and explosive weapons in populated areas

The list of weapons that can, and should be monitored through casualty records is endless. On-going casualty counts of individuals killed or wounded by CIA drone strikes cast doubt on the claims that modern weapons are more precise and pose less risks to civilians than their predecessors.[45] For instance, some researchers have claimed, in Pakistan, that as many as 80% of the victims of drone strikes are civilians.[46]

Explosive weapons in populated areas inflict similar harm on civilians. Action on Armed Violence's count of casualties from explosive weapons in populated areas shows that at least 82% of the victims are civilians.[47]

Careful and accurate casualty recording data is vital to establish the true impact of these weapons, and to bring about greater regulations, and even a ban, if such weapon use can be proven to be disproportionately harmful on civilians.

CASUALTY RECORDING INFORMS MILITARY AND PEACEKEEPING STRATEGIES

Tracking casualties of combat enables a better understanding of the humanitarian impact of military operations and can validate calls for tighter military rules.[48]

For warring parties, tracking casualties - determining the impact of their fight on the local civilians, and on their own soldiers - is crucial. It can help to identify where most civilians are dying - air strikes, indirect fire, or checkpoints - and to change the practises that cause these killings. Better protection of civilians is likely to engender greater trust in militaries, which is often vital for securing support from local authorities.[49]

For non-military purposes, counting mechanisms can evaluate military approaches and civilian harm; and can hold security forces to account. Precise listings help to separate rumours, accusations, denials and false allegations from true claims.

Air strikes in Afghanistan

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) runs a casualty recording system which, since 2007, has shown trends in civilian casualty numbers. This system found that, among all causes of death,

Children are looking at a pamphlet during an UNMAS explosive hazard awareness session at the Buulo IDP camp in Hawl Wadaag district of Mogadishu, Somalia © UNMAS/T. Bunbury – flicker creative commons.

air strikes "in the context of pro-government military tactics" were a major one. According to UNAMA's own sources, this evidence, combined with a well-documented incident of an airstrike in southern Herat in August 2008, which killed more than 90 civilians, shook up the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

In response the ISAF established a better recording system - the Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell –, and appraised their air strikes. In September 2008, ISAF issued a tactical directive to limit the use of air strikes in particular circumstances.[50] Even though UNAMA's records were not the only reason for this shift, their rigorous casualty counts informed the debate on civilian harm from air strikes with concrete data, complemented other anecdotal and disputed evidence. This directive was the first in a series of tightened rules, along with a revised counter-insurgency doctrine under General McChrystal, stressing the need to better protect civilians.[51]

Civilian casualties from aerial attacks dropped significantly between 2009 (359 dead, 176 injured) and 2010 (171 dead, 133 injured), according to UNAMA records. This trend is mirrored in ISAF's data which showed a 10% decrease due to air strikes in 2010.[52]

Again, the causes for this drop are many. But UNAMA's advocacy for the protection on civilians, backed up by solid casualty data, is certainly one of them.

Checkpoints in Afghanistan
The International Security Assistance Force's Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell, operated by a specialised team, tracks deaths and injuries of Afghan civilians. The idea is that, based on their records, future operations be improved and civilian casualty numbers reduced.[53] A success that can be directly attributed to the Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell is a change in directives concerning "escalation of force". "Escalations of force" are a military approach to assessing threats, and

Tarana Akbari, 12, screams in fear moments after a suicide bomber detonated a bomb in a crowd at the Abul Fazel Shrine in Kabul on December 06, 2011 © Knight Foundation – flicker creative commons.

to respond accordingly, for example at checkpoints. The data of the Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell showed that many fatal shootings of civilians occurred at ISAF's checkpoints, often within a 100-metre radius. The reason, the Cell found, were communication breakdowns. According to a British army Colonel, the problem was that approaching vehicles did sometimes not slow down. "This is where as a soldier you suddenly think, 'I'm about to die because this vehicle is going to drive in here and detonate.'" There were no nonlethal options for soldiers in that situation.[54]

Once this pattern was identified, ISAF responded with a new directive for escalations of force. It aimed to improve communications by giving soldiers more warning signals to alert the approaching drivers, such as laser dazzlers, paint ball guns, and chalk bullets.[55] By the Tracking Cell's own account, this directive was successful in reducing civilian casualties. Escalations of force, it found, "produced 50% less deaths in the eight months following the new directive, compared to the same amount of time in 2009."[56]

Indirect fire policy in Somalia
In its struggle to push back radical Islamist groups, the Somali Transitional Government receives support from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). AMISOM's 2007 mandate had a strong military focus, actively engaging it in combat. Unsurprisingly, this approach claimed a high civilian toll, particularly as fights were frequently carried out in Somalia's cities.

Mogadishu is one of these cities. Human rights groups accused AMISOM of indiscriminate shelling in response to Al-Shabaab attacks in Mogadishu, and claimed that scores of civilians had been killed. Between 2010 and mid-2011, 1,000 civilians died and 4,000 were injured, some estimates said.[57] More than 8,000 individuals injured by weapons were admitted to hospitals in Mogadishu in the first nine months of 2011, reported the World Health Organisation.[58] It was clear, too, that many of these were due to artillery fire in areas densely populated by civilians.[59]

These and similar figures led the Chairperson of the African Union Commission to note "the humanitarian community has increasingly raised concern about the high number of civilian casualties" and that such accu-

sations could harm AMISOM's credibility and erode public trust.[60]

In response, AMISOM adopted new measures to minimise civilian death in late 2010/early 2011 and introduced them in the AMISOM revised rules of engagement in 2012.[61] A new indirect fire policy – a policy for fire when there is no direct line of sight to the target[62] – tightened the use of artillery, which was responsible for a lot of the indiscriminate killings, by establishing 'no-fire zones' and made provisions for assistance to civilian victims.[63] It also imagined the establishment of a Civilian Casualty Tracking, Analysis and Response Cell (CCTARC). The goal of the Cell is to allow the AMISOM force commander to understand and analyze over time the impact his forces were having on the population where they were conducting combat operations. The 'response' aspect of the Cell is meant to enable commanders to engage respectfully and properly with victims, and to offer amends.[64] The Cell will begin to work as soon as the necessary personnel will be in place.[65]

Along with other dynamics, this new policy seems to have contributed to an improved security situation. Accurate casualty figures are difficult to obtain as long as the civilian tracking cell is not fully functional. Yet, data from the World Health Organisation shows that between January and September 2012, four hospitals in Mogadishu have treated 5,219 people injured by weapons. This means over 3,000 casualties less than the same period in 2011.[66] The same Organisation also identifies a 42% decrease in casualties of violence between November and December 2013, compared to the same period in 2012.[67]

This reduction in the number of casualties is probably due to several factors. Further research would be required to establish a clear correlation between the indirect fire policy and the decrease in the number of casualties. It is clear though that the high numbers of victims have led AMISOM to review their rules of engagement. In 2011 Human Rights Watch reported "[instances of indiscriminate shelling] appear to have diminished, indicating possible efforts on the part of AMISOM to improve its targeting and reduce indiscriminate fire, notably through the identification of no-fire zones."[68]

CASUALTY RECORDING HELPS TARGET RESOURCES TO PREVENT AND REDUCE VIOLENCE

Resources to tackle violence are generally scarce. Casualty recording can provide an accurate picture of the incidence of violence, and form a basis for deciding how to optimise the use of limited humanitarian and medical resources. In other words, "casualty data is a starting point for operational activities."[69]

Interrupting violence in Chicago
Cure Violence is an American NGO using the preventive tools of public health to curb violence in communities. Founded in 1995, Cure Violence diagnoses the problem, treats it as if it was an infectious epidemic, and carefully monitors the results.[70] Using all available data and rigid scientific methods, Cure Violence creates profiles of the individuals at highest risk. The organisation also uses police records to determine the areas that are most affected by shootings and killings.[71] This information is used to detect potential violence, and interrupt violent conflict before it happens. Violence interrupters, indigenous workers from these same communities with a high credibility, engage with the high-risk candidates, and mediate conflicts. Continuous monitoring of the data allows Cure Violence to measure their success rates, and to immediately spot where things go wrong. A multi-year evaluation in three cities found that shootings had been reduced in all neighbourhoods where the organisation worked: the number of shootings fell from 41% to 73% in Chicago between 2000 to 2008, from 34% to 44% in Baltimore between 2007 and 2010, and by 20% in New York between 2009 and 2011.[72]

Not all organisations maintain such rigorous, well-documented and long-term evaluation mechanisms. Yet many NGOs use continuous, systematic and comprehensively collected data on casualties to target their operations.

Recording systems, which are used, but could not ascertain any quantitative impacts include:

Central Africa's Lord's Resistance Army Crisis Tracker: The international NGO "Invisible Children" runs the innovative "Lord's Resistance Army Crisis Tracker". It monitors attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army in Central Africa through NGOs and regional se-

curity actors. The collated updates are then distributed through the *Invisible Children's Early Warning Network*, which informs remote communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic "in near real time" on current happenings. It also maps the incidents – including civilian deaths and injuries-on an online map.[73] The United Nations, national militaries and humanitarian workers reportedly also use this data.[74] AOAV could not ascertain whether there is a quantitative impact on levels of violence.

Kingston West's Armed Violence Observatory:
Located in Jamaica's capital, the Kingston West Armed Violence Observatory operates in a police division in one of Kingston's dangerous areas. It collects data on injuries and serious crimes - including murder - from the police, and shares it once a month with the Crime Observatory Meeting Group, composed of government and NGO bodies involved in the fight against violence. Crime data is visualised, and, together, the group designs follow-up activities and interventions. "It is very difficult to attribute the reduction in murders in the division to the work of the Observatory", says Tarik Weeks of the Violence Prevention Alliance Jamaica, "but most certainly the harmonization of efforts and data, and data-driven interventions did contribute to a reduction."[75]

Action on Armed Violence's Liberia Armed Violence Observatory gathers, analyses and reports on armed violence data in Liberia, pulling together data from the Liberia National Police, the United Nations Police, hospitals and the media. Since 2011, the observatory has helped provide data to inform new efforts against crime in policy and programming. The Ministry of Justice, for example, recently instituted a curfew for motorcycle drivers in response to associated incidents of violence. A new violence reduction programme in what the data identified as one of the most violence-affected areas, West Point, was set up. No evaluations of these relatively recent initiatives exist, yet.

Action on Armed Violence's work in Western Sahara: Action on Armed Violence records casualties of land-mines and explosive remnants of war in Western Sahara. Held by local partners, the database informs AOAV's victim assistance programme, including micro-grants and supplies of prostheses.

Media monitoring in Nigeria: Nigeria Watch monitors homicides and violent deaths in Nigeria, mainly drawing on media sources. It makes its data available online through its own website and through the interactive Nigeria Peacebuilding Map - a hub of information for anyone interested in the incidence of violence, and responses to it, in Nigeria. This data has been used by international organisations for baseline assessments, to identify where to allocate grants and to inform security briefings.[76]

CASUALTY RECORDING STRENGTHENS ACCOUNTABILITY

Casualty records not only contribute to reducing ongoing violence, they also help address past, and prevent future violence. In the legal processes that deal with war crimes, for example, casualty records can play a key role. Tallies of victims can be used for investigations of violations of international humanitarian law, and contribute to holding perpetrators accountable in court. Punishing them gives a guarantee to the victims that the violence will not be repeated. Failure to do so may leave victims with bitterness about unrecorded crimes, which can "itself be a driver of future conflict". [77]

Solid records also facilitate apologies to innocent victims, and the provision of reparations and assistance where needed.[78]

Guatemala
Former Guatemalan military ruler Efrain Rios Montt was convicted for genocide and crimes against humanity in May 2013. In what Amnesty International called a "historic step", he was found guilty of massacres of the Ixil, an indigenous population in 1982/83. During the trial, testimonies of forensic experts of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation contributed vital evidence about casualties. Collating evidence from exhumations and interviews, they were able to identify remains of Ixil victims, and details about the traumas suffered. Their statements backed up witness testimonies with scientific facts. Shortly after, on 20 May, the verdict was overturned by Guatemala's constitutional court due to quarrels about the proceedings - but the forensic evidence remains.

Bosnia
Casualty records have been used by the state to allocate war benefits to surviving family members, and in international legal processes. The Sarajevo-based Research and Documentation Centre has meticulously recorded over 100,000 deaths from Bosnia's conflict between 1991 and 1995. True to its philosophy, "to create truth based on facts", the Centre has shared its records with different national and international courts. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and the Special Chamber for War Crimes in Bosnia, has used the evidence for prosecution and victim reparations.[79]

CONCLUSION

AOAV does not want to join the chorus about the accuracy of casualty figures in specific conflicts. We do not engage with the politics of the numbers and the blame games associated with casualty counts. We argue that recording civilian harm is vital to reducing it.

Every casualty counts. It counts not only because of the legal and the moral imperative, but also because there is a utility to it. Proper documentation of death and injury furthers an understanding of patterns of violence by shedding light on the often foggy and chaotic context of armed violence.

Systematic, continuous and comprehensive casualty records can help identify weapons inflicting disproportionate harm on civilians, such as landmines and cluster munitions, and contribute to implementing regulations.

They can denounce lethal military practises – at checkpoints, in aerial bombardments, during artillery fire in cities - and provide hard facts as a basis to change them.

They can point towards areas where the incidence of violence is highest, enabling assistance to be targeted where it is most needed.

Records can also help hold perpetrators accountable, and be a first step towards delivering assistance to survivors.

Yet casualty records are, more often than not, absent or incomplete. AOAV and the Every Casualty Campaign believe that the United Nations and all governments, with or without internal conflict, must change that. Casualties need to be recorded, and documentation of the effects of hostilities on civilians must be enhanced.

US Army First Armoured Division soldiers survey the scene where a car bomb exploded in front of a hotel killing at least four people, on January 28, 2004 in Baghdad, Iraq. Mario Tama/GettyImages News/Thinkstock.

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