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PRESERVING HOPE IN AFGHANISTAN

Protecting children in the world's
most lethal conflict

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Cover photo:
Boys at the Abdul Ahad Karzai orphanage in Kandahar city.

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#AChildisAChild

PRESERVING HOPE IN AFGHANISTAN

PROTECTING CHILDREN IN THE WORLD’S MOST LETHAL CONFLICT

#ChildrenUnderAttack

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Map source: www.geology.com



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CAUGHT AMID A PITILESS CONFLICT

Every day, an average of nine children are killed or injured in Afghanistan, a country that has become the world's most lethal war zone after forty years of conflict and turmoil ¹.

Between 2009 and 2018, armed conflict killed nearly 6,500 children and injured close to 15,000 others².

Many children who escape the direct effects of violence still feel the impact on their daily lives. In 2018, the United Nations verified 162 attacks against schools, hospitals and their staffs. It also recorded 44 incidents in which humanitarian aid could not be delivered to needy communities, mainly due to the

¹ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) 2018)

² Casualty figures and incidents cited in this report are based on reports by United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)

activities of armed groups.

The casualties mount despite international laws that oblige all parties to the conflict to protect civilians.

"Afghan children, their families and communities suffer the horrific consequences of conflict each and every day," said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. "Those same children are desperate to grow up, go to school, learn skills, and build a future for themselves.

"We can, and must, do so much more to reinforce their extraordinary courage and resilience."

Nabih (right), his wife Hanifa and their six children live in a camp for displaced people outside Herat city. They fled their home in Badghis province due to conflict and drought.

Nahal, Firouzeh and Asman are among the adolescents whose lives have been shaped by violence, turmoil and poverty in Afghanistan³.

- Nahal, 13, still shudders when she remembers the air strike that burned her face, leaving her disfigured.
- Firouzeh, 15, cannot shake the memory of hiding in a ruined building through war and a harsh winter.
- Asman weeps as she describes being forced to marry a stranger at age 15 to keep her younger sister from being sold to pay family debts.

Despite these traumas, Nahal, Firouzeh and Asman are desperate to make the most of

³ Children's names have been changed for their protection

their lives by continuing their education. "The only way to change my future is to study," says Firouzeh. "With commitment, one day I can be a teacher or a doctor."

The three adolescents belong to a generation eager to repair the damage of decades of violence, and to fulfil their – and Afghanistan's – potential.

"Peace is, of course, what Afghanistan needs above all else," Executive Director Fore said. "But right now, civilians – especially children – must be shielded from the impact of conflict. The parties involved must fulfil their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law to prevent civilian casualties, end the targeting of schools and health centres, and allow access to humanitarian aid."

A boy plays near abandoned military vehicles in southern Afghanistan.



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A DEADLY PLACE FOR CHILDREN

Even by Afghanistan's grim standards, 2019 has been particularly deadly. The months of July to September registered the highest number of civilian casualties in a single quarter since 2009, when the United Nations began systematic documentation.

For children, 2018 was even more lethal: 927 children were killed in armed conflict and 2,135 were injured. In 8 of the country's 34 provinces, the number of civilian casualties rose more than 50 per cent compared with the previous year.

As civilian casualties surged during the

past decade, most of the country suffered. However, the severity of the attacks and their consequences varied considerably from province to province.

According to 2018 data from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the highest number of casualties were in Kabul, where 596 civilians were killed and 1,270 injured. The eastern provinces close to the Pakistan border, including Nangarhar, Paktya and Ghazni, and the southern part of the country, including Helmand, Kandahar, and Farah provinces, were also hard hit.

Inside a dormitory for boys living at a state-run orphanage in the southern city of Kandahar. The orphanage provides shelter for around 170 boys in total.

Suicide attacks and aerial strikes

Suicide bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have been an important factor behind the high casualty figures. In the first nine months of 2019, these methods, employed by armed groups, were responsible for 42 per cent of civilian deaths and injuries.

One such incident occurred in August, when a suicide bomber attacked a crowded wedding hall in Kabul, killing 15 children and 76 adults.

Though ground engagements were the leading cause of child casualties in 2018, aerial operations by government and pro-government forces also registered a sharp increase, causing 236 deaths and a similar number of injuries.

In one attack, in Helmand province on 27 November 2018, a family home was targeted, killing 23 civilians, including 10 children.



©UNICEF Afghanistan/2018/Aizada

Lethal remnants of war

Unexploded shells and other debris (known as explosive remnants of war- ERW) represent a special risk for children, boys in particular.

One incident in Laghman province in April 2019 killed seven boys and maimed eight others. Between January and September 2019, children accounted for 77 per cent of the civilian casualties caused by ERWs.

Multiple parties to the conflict have been cited for recruiting children in breach of international law. In 2018, 46 instances (including one involving a girl) were verified, although many more were reported. Armed

groups have been known to recruit children to plant IEDs, gather intelligence and for other war-related tasks. Cases of conflict-related sexual violence against children have also been recorded.

An additional concern are the children detained by Afghan authorities on suspicion of belonging to armed groups. As of December 2018, at least 205 boys were detained in juvenile rehabilitation centres on such charges.

Several children were among some 30 people killed and over one hundred injured by a suicide attack and car bomb which struck this sports club in Kabul on 5 September 2018.

TEENAGE SURVIVOR OF A LANDMINE EXPLOSION

15 year old Rahimullah was fleeing a battle in his village in Helmand province when there was a large explosion.

“I was walking ahead of my brother,” recalled Rahimullah. “Suddenly I stepped on a landmine and was thrown into a nearby stream. When I opened my eyes, I saw that both of my legs had been severed.”

The boy was saved by a stranger who carried him to safety.

Having survived this horrific experience, the two boys later suffered the deaths of their parents and were placed in care.

Today, Rahimullah and his brother, Hafeezullah, live at an orphanage near the city of Kandahar, where they attend school, and where Rahimullah can indulge his passion for basketball.

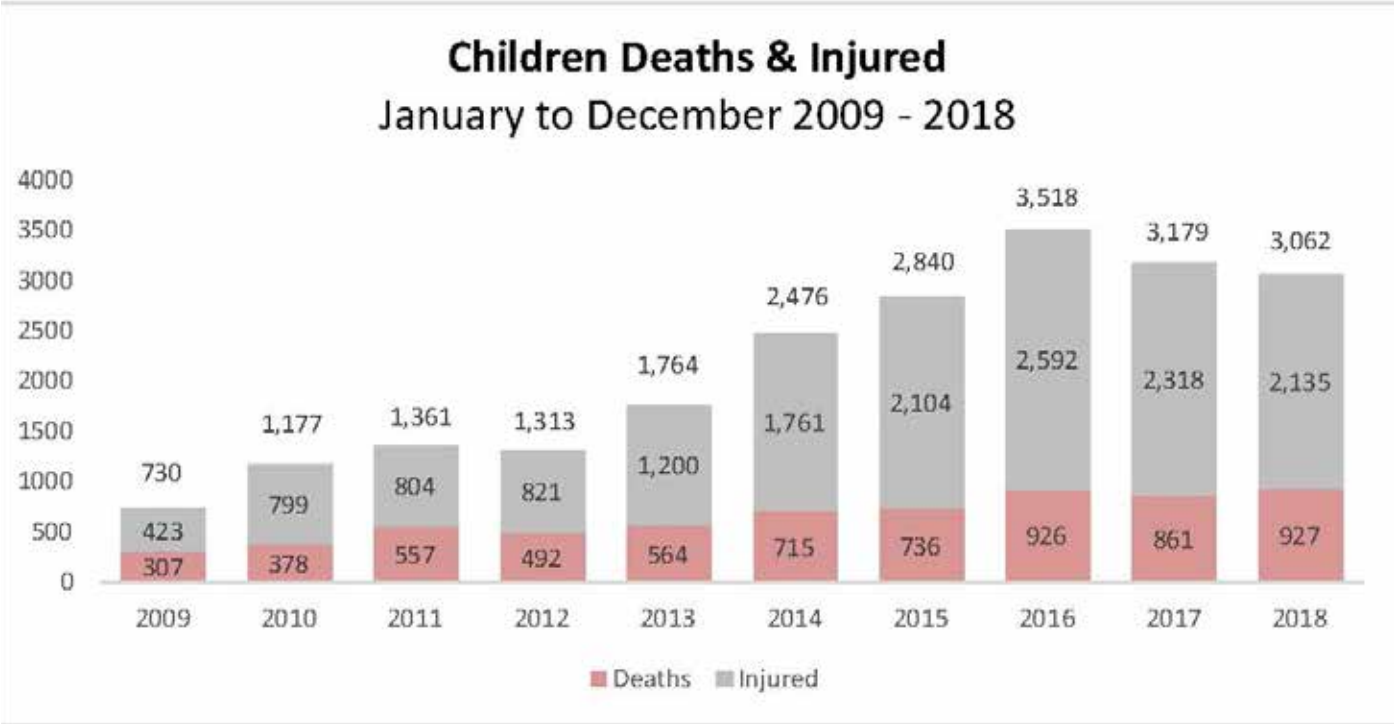
“I love to study,” said Rahimullah. “When I grow up I want to help others with disabilities. I feel I understand them having gone through it myself.”



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A WORSENING TOLL: THE DEADLY IMPACT ON CHILDREN OF TEN YEARS OF CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN

Between 2009 and 2018, armed conflict killed 6,463 children and injured 14,957 others



Source: UNAMA Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict report 2018



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12 year-old Yasamin holds her baby sister, Aisha Gul, outside a nutrition centre in a camp for displaced people near the western city of Herat. The two girls came here with their family to escape fighting in their home province of Badghis.

Deepening poverty and displacement

Beyond the death and injuries caused by the conflict, the violence of recent years has undermined the hopes and prospects of a whole generation of Afghan children in other ways too.

Underlying challenges, including poverty, displacement, negative norms and limited access to essential services have festered or deepened.

According to the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016–2017, the economic growth and relative stability that prevailed in the period leading up to 2014 gave way to escalating

violence and a worsening economy, hurting rural and urban areas alike. By 2016, an estimated 55 per cent of Afghans lived below the poverty line, compared to 34 per cent in 2007 and 2008.

Young people are especially hard hit. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 2017, 42 per cent of youth were not in employment, education or training.

Deteriorating security conditions have contributed to large-scale population displacement. According to the United

Nations, 217,000 people were newly-displaced in the first nine months of 2019. During the same period, Afghanistan had to cope with the return of 287,000 returnees from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Over 40 per cent of those returning were children.

Conflict drove Yasmina, 15, from her home in Badghis province to an IDP camp near the city of Herat. Conditions in the camp are harsh, and she yearns for more than just survival. “I wish I was educated,” Yasmina said. “I would have found a way out then.”

A makeshift tent provides shelter for a mother and her children who fled insecurity in Badghis province in 2018.



© UNICEF Afghanistan/2019/Avad

Negative social norms

Afghan children have long been prey to a range of pernicious social norms and traditional practices. Girls face particular risks, including honour killings, domestic abuse and sexual violence. The traditional practice of *baad*, in which a girl is given to a family in repayment of a debt, remains widespread.

Child marriage- often an attempt to reduce the economic burden of a large family- is common. Nationwide, at least one in three girls is married by age 18. According to a 2018 study, 42 per cent of households reported at least one instance of child marriage.

“I was ten when I was given to a man,” said Shabana, as she waited in line outside a nutrition centre in an IDP camp in Herat. “People might think we are savages for selling our children. But try to be in our shoes. What’s the way out? You tell me and I’ll do it.”

Boys are not immune to abuse, being far more likely than girls to be recruited by armed groups and forces. Another form of exploitation is *bacha bazi*, the practice of hiring young boys as dancers or for sexual activities. Though the revised penal code criminalizes *bacha bazi*, enforcing the law remains a challenge.



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A girl carries her little brother in a wheelbarrow in the village of Qara Kamar in

ASSISTING CHILDREN AT RISK

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https://www.yunbaogao.cn/report/index/report?reportId=5_6046



and informal community networks, while also working with case managers and social workers whose job it is to help individual children.”

Efforts to protect children in Afghanistan are often hampered by a lack of official identity.

Only a third of Afghan children under age

5 have a birth certificate. As a result, child protection and social workers face challenges when identifying children and linking them with assistance. UNICEF is working to help communities and families better understand the importance of registering their children’s birth, for example at health facilities, where vaccination is promoted along with birth registration.



©UNICEF Afghanistan/2019/DeJongh

Adolescents learn tailoring at a Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre in northern Afghanistan. The centre aims to give youngsters who had a difficult start in life the chance of rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Resilience against all odds

Despite a history of hardship, two recent events offered a glimpse of a more hopeful future for the country’s most vulnerable citizens – the finalization of a Child Rights Protection Law and the start of service for a new corps of social workers with the Ministry of Social Affairs.

At the same time, children have demonstrated great resilience in the face of extreme challenges. Asman is one such child.

“We were living in Badghis province. One day, Taliban fighters came to our house looking for my brother, who was serving in the army. They said that if we didn’t hand him over, they would take me and three of my sisters instead. My father refused.

“We fled our home and ran to the mountains, leaving everything behind. My mother had to sell her only gold earrings to pay the bus fare to get us to the city. When we got there, we had nothing – no

tent, only our scarves to cover us.

“I managed to get work sewing clothes for an aid project. But when the project closed, I was back at square one. We borrowed money and got into debt.

“One day a man came to take my sister as a way of repaying the debt. I couldn’t allow that to happen. I said: “Sell me instead.” That is how I came to be married at age 15.

“My husband died when I was six months’ pregnant. I returned to help look after my family. There are 13 of us now, and my father is paralysed.”

A year after returning home, Asman was enrolled in a girls’ school outside Herat.

“I am getting an education,” Asman said. “That keeps me going. I want to be a model to my son. A capable woman who changed the course of her life and her family’s.”